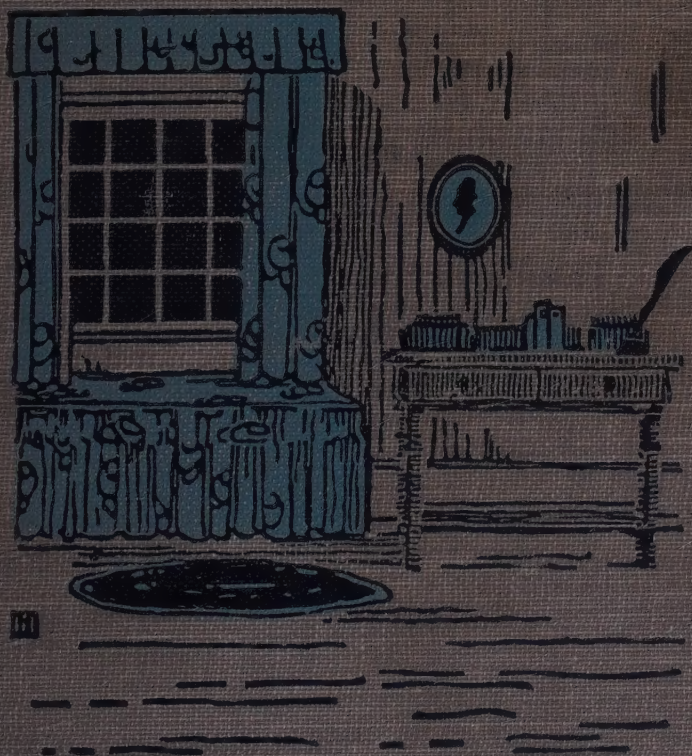


ADVENTURES OF CHICKEN LITTLE JANE



LILY MUNSELL RITCHIE

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She had never navigated one alone, but she promptly
decided to try

Chicken Little Jane Comes to Town

BY
LILY MUNSELL RITCHIE



BARSE & HOPKINS
PUBLISHERS

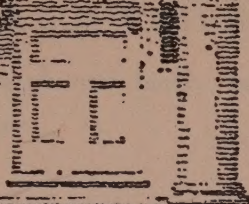
NEWARK, N. J.

NEW YORK, N. Y.

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MADE IN U. S. A.

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CHICKEN·LITTLE·JANE COMES·TO·TOWN



CHAPTER·I A·DISAPPOINTMENT

"I DON'T care—I think it's just too mean for anything, I can't go to Annapolis with Mother." Chicken Little was unmistakably pouting.

"Sounds to me very much as if you did care—tremendously," replied Marian slyly.

It was a hot August morning and they were sitting out on the back porch peeling peaches for Mrs. Morton who was busy in the hot kitchen putting them up. Jilly was playing with Huz and Buz under a tree near by. As usual Huz was not behaving well. Jilly wished him to be a "itty tiny baby" and be covered up. Huz seemed to have been designed by nature to be entirely dog. He had a good thick coat of hair which seemed to him quite sufficient for a sultry day and he firmly declined to be enveloped in a doll blanket. Jilly patted and coaxed and admonished in vain. Huz flipped

the small red blanket off as fast as she spread it over him, wagging his tail apologetically immediately after.

Chicken Little peeled a whole peach before she answered. "Well, I guess you'd care if you'd been planning all summer to go, and Carol had asked you to a hop, and you hadn't seen your brother for a year—and—and—you don't any of you seem to care a single bit if I am disappointed—so there!"

Chicken Little dumped her painful of peeled peaches into the great brownstone jar that stood ready, so energetically that three shot out beyond its ample mouth and rolled along the floor.

"Look out, Sis, don't take it out on the peaches!"

Chicken Little was close to tears, "Well, it just seems as if everything goes wrong—this old drouth spoiling the corn crop—and all these horrid peaches to put up and now I can't go!" She jabbed viciously at the wandering yellow balls with her paring knife. But the pared fruit was slippery and slid out from her ill-directed thrust off the porch into the dirt of the gravel path beneath. Chicken Little was hot and her hands were lame from much peeling—she loathed peeling anyhow. This was the last straw. She flung down her empty pan with a bang and started for the screen door into the kitchen.

Marian caught her dress. "Where are you going, Jane?"

"I'm going upstairs and write to Ernest—that's what I'm going to do—I bet he'll care whether his only sister comes to see him or not!"

"Chicken Little, do you want to know what I think about you? I think you are being a very hateful selfish little girl!" Marian said this deliberately without any suggestion of anger.

Jane opened her eyes wide in amazement. It was most unlike Marian, who usually sympathized warmly with her young sister-in-law's hopes or woes. She paused with one hand on the screen doubtfully.

"Come back here and sit down—I want to have a talk with you. That cry you're planning to have will keep a few minutes."

Chicken Little came reluctantly back and stood by Marian's chair.

"Sit down! And you might as well go on peeling while you listen. Mother wants to get these all up today."

Jane was too astonished to refuse. When she had filled her pan and set to work again, Marian delivered herself.

"If there's anyone needs to be sympathized with around here, it's Mother. You know how hard the farm's been for Mother. You and I like the farm and get a lot of fun out of the horses and the fishing and the hunting, and lots of other things that

Mother doesn't have a chance to enjoy. And Mother has never been used to the hard work she has to do here. It's wearing on her—you know just as well as I that she hasn't been well for over a year. That's why Father Morton is anxious to send her off just as soon as possible. Mother intended to wait till Christmas and take you with her, but with the poor corn crop, Father doesn't feel that he can afford the extra expense of sending you on with her. And, Jane, I don't know any reason in the world why he should. If anyone is to go with Mother, I think it should be Father himself. You will have a beautiful year back in Centerville with Alice and Dick and Katy and Gertie. That is certainly change and recreation enough for a fourteen-year-old girl. I know you want to see Ernest—we all do. Next year he will be home, but this year Father thinks it best for him to spend his leave with Mother in Washington. It will be a wonderful change for her and he can see and learn so much there. And—well, it is a question of expense again. If it were not for your going away to school, Ernest might come home, Chicken Little. But Father and Mother don't want you to go to this little country school any longer. And you don't want to go. So Ernest is giving up coming home partly for you, Miss Abused. Do you begin to see why I say you are a selfish girl?"

Marian eyed Jane with an anxious smile.

The expression of petulance had gradually faded from the girl's face and she was gazing at her lengthening paring soberly. But she did not feel called upon to answer Marian's question.

"We're all sorry about your disappointment, 'dear. But you are, most too young really to enjoy a visit to Annapolis this year—next year or the year after, you would have a much better time."

Chicken Little protested. "I wouldn't either—I'd have a perfectly bully time! And Carol's asked——"

"Yes, alas, Carol was foolish enough to ask you to go to a hop. Carol is eighteen and hasn't seen you for four years and doesn't realize when he is almost grown up, that you are merely an overgrown little girl who says (bully) and wouldn't have the faintest idea how to conduct herself if she should go to a hop. Carol would be mighty sick of his bargain if Mother were to permit you to accept his invitation. And if you imagine any of those resplendent young midshipmen would pay any attention to a little gangling country girl like yourself, you are sadly mistaken. Wait till you grow up, Chick. You mustn't think you can bloom into a charming young lady merely by going to a Naval Academy hop. And if you could, you'd miss all manner of good times by growing up like a mush-

room. Why, you have all your High School before you yet. I wouldn't have missed my High School days for anything—I loved them."

Chicken Little brightened up. "Did you, Marian? Tell me about some of the things you did." Chicken Little was anxious to change the subject. She had been impressed with the reasonableness of Marian's arguments but she wasn't quite ready to own up.

Marian detected the ruse and laughed.

"Had a plenty, have you, Sis? Well, I guess I did give you a dose, but I couldn't bear to have you moping round worrying Mother Morton and spoiling all your own fun planning for school in the bargain. I'll take it back about your being selfish. You're a pretty generous youngster most of the time, and you didn't mean to be piggy this time, but—you were—just that. Own up, now, weren't you, little Sis?"

Marian laughed teasingly.

"I guess—maybe—I didn't think much about Mother and—but I did want to go awfully. Do you truly think I wouldn't have a good time, Marian?"

"Not the kind of good time you were expecting to have. Of course you'd love the trip and seeing Ernest—and the Academy and all. But you are going to have a beautiful trip going back to Center-

ville. Fix your mind on that and forget the disappointment."

"Got another kettleful ready, girls?" Mrs. Morton came to the door wiping her flushed perspiring face. "It is so hot today. We will surely have rain tonight."

Chicken Little jumped up with an alacrity that had not marked any of her movements before that morning. "I'll bring the peaches in."

"Come take my pan, Mother, and I'll stir the fruit awhile." Marian was smiling to herself over the change in Jane's manner.

"I think I will come and sit down awhile. You may watch the peaches till the syrup begins to thicken. Chick-a-biddy, I'll take your pan and you'd better run and get your Latin. Father will want to hear you when he comes in at noon."

"There comes the mail man," said Marian.

"He's stopping, too."

Chicken Little dumped the pan in her mother's lap and sped down the path.

The mail carrier was an old soldier, slightly lame and very fond of visiting along his route.

"I reckon it'll bust your pa up buying stamps to answer all these letters, Jane. Let's see—here's one, two, three, four, five, six."

"All for me?" Chicken Little's eyes danced.

"Well, not precisely, I 'low you might get a deed

to this fat blue one. Wait till I get my glasses. Looks like it come from Chicagy. Expectin' anything from Chicagy? And if here ain't Miss Precious."

He waved his hand to Jilly who had come as fast as her short legs would permit, accompanied by Huz.

The kindly old carrier reached down and placed a letter in her chubby hands. "Fer pappy—don't you drop it. And here's one for the dog, too."

He flung the weekly paper into Huz's waiting jaws. Buz had been too lazy to follow Jilly.

"Goody, it's from Sherm, and one from the Captain inside." Jane had been hastily examining her treasure. "They'll be home Saturday. Oh-h-h!"

She gave a long-drawn-out and ecstatic gurgle.

It had been a lonesome hard summer with Ernest and Sherm both away—and the constant anxiety about the crops. And she had had the detested Beginning Latin on top of fruit picking and practising.

Dr. Morton thought she might possibly enter the second year of High School if she had a little start with her Latin. So he had undertaken to coach her himself. His teaching was nothing if not thorough. He never accepted anything short of a perfect recitation. Poor Chicken Little had been handed back her text with the admonition to study the lesson till

she had learned it before trying to recite, so many times, that it had become a family joke. Frank said she could take swimming lessons in the tears she shed during the first week.

"And he's been to Niagara Falls." Jane was reading her letter eagerly; "and—oh, Mother, Marian, he's been to see Ernest! Sherm and the Captain have seen Ernest!" She went scurrying up to the house trying to read as she ran.

"Yes, they saw in the New York papers that his ship was to be in port two days and they got permission to go on board. And he's looking fine—awful brown, Sherm says—only thin. Says they work 'em pretty hard on ship-board and the grub isn't as good as at the Academy. And, oh, Marian, Ernest's sent me an anchor off his cap! And Sherm says the Captain's bringing me something that will make me hum. What do you suppose?"

"A guitar, possibly, or some kind of musical instrument," ventured Marian.

"Does he say when Ernest will get back to the Academy or whether he is enjoying the cruise?" inquired Mrs. Morton.

"No, but he got a demerit for pinning on a button instead of sewing it, and Carol got two for chalking a chair seat for one of the boys—only the captain of the ship came along and sat down in it himself. Ernest said the old boy was awful mad. Carol got

off pretty easy though because they didn't find out who did it for two or three days and the captain had time to cool off."

"That sounds exactly like Carol. He put a tack on Miss Ames' chair once in the fourth grade at Centerville." Marian laughed at the recollection.

"The idea of Ernest's getting a demerit for such a careless trick," mourned Mrs. Morton. "I taught him specially how to sew his buttons on so they would hold, as soon as I heard the boys had to do it. But I must say it seems to me a very senseless performance to expect a growing boy to sew on his own buttons. I should think the government could hire some competent woman to keep their clothes in repair. Sewing isn't a man's work." Mrs. Morton twisted her fingers nervously.

"Never mind, Mother Morton, sewing on a few buttons isn't going to kill Ernest or getting a few demerits for carelessness either. A sailor isn't supposed to have women along to look after him at sea. So you see Uncle Sam's bringing him up to take care of himself. You won't know your boy—he'll be so much more of a man, Mother dear."

"That may all be, but I do not think sewing a suitable occupation for a man. And it seems strange to me that the government can't provide them with good food on the ships. I think Father should

write to the senator about it at once." Mrs. Morton had a little worried pucker between her brows.

"But, Mother, he didn't say it wasn't good—he just said it wasn't as good as at the Academy. And you know Ernest wrote when he first got there that they had bully grub."

"Read that part again," directed her mother.

"When are the Captain and Sherm coming home?" asked Marian.

"About the twentieth. Why, that'll be the first of next week. Cæsar's ghost, they'll be in time for the picnic! Oh, I don't want Sherm to hear me recite! He'll grin that crooked grin of his and I shall die—I just know I shall."

"What day is the picnic?" asked her mother coming out of her reverie. She was still worrying about Ernest. "Thursday? I must lengthen your pink lawn and have it done up."

"Yes, you'd better be practising your piece, young lady, you haven't even committed it to memory yet. Frank said he'd help you when you had learned it," Marian admonished.

"Dear me, the morning is flying," said Mrs. Morton, "I must get back to my peaches. Go to your Latin, child, and then go out and pick another basket of yellow clings. They are best for pickling."

Chicken Little went into the dusky parlor and

settled down in the big rocker. She took out her book and began to mumble a declension.

"Bellum, belli, bello,—I do wonder what the Captain's got for me. I know it is something lovely and expensive but I do hope it isn't a guitar. Mother would be sure to make me practise on it."

"Bellum, belli, bello,—no, that isn't right. Oh, dear, I've lost the place! Bellum, bellum, bello. Of course the vocative is the same as the accusative. I do wish he'd bring me a necklace or another string of corals—or a blue moire sash like Mamie's."

"Bella, bellorum, bellorum—what on earth am I saying? Bellis—won't it be fun to have Sherm home? My I must study that recitation. Oh, he didn't say whether he saw Carol or not. I wonder what Carol looks like. Ernest said he wasn't as fat as he used to be. Maybe he'll go home to Centerville for his September leave and I'll get to see him there. I bet I will."

This was one of the most obstinate declensions Jane had ever studied. She did not stir from the parlor or the big chair until her mother called her an hour later, and she put in most of her time on it, but she got the vocative wrong the minute she tried to recite.

"Father, I just naturally hate Latin! I can't get

it! Why, I studied pretty nearly an hour this morning."

"You mean you held your book in front of you and dreamed, Humbug. If you had actually studied, it wouldn't have taken you three minutes to learn the second declension. It is one of the easiest. But it is a hot day so I won't scold. But mind, I expect a lesson tomorrow. By the way if Mother can spare you, I wish you'd make up a big jug of lemonade about four o'clock and bring it down to the hay field. The men get awfully dry on a sultry day like this. You may ride Calico."



CHAPTER II THE · TORNADO

THE day grew hotter and hotter. There seemed scarce a breath of air stirring. Chicken Little could see little eddying heat waves rising. Everything looked parched. Even the zinnias, which loved sunshine, hung their gay heads drooping. She took an old comforter and the dogs and set out for the orchard about three o'clock hunting a cool place for a nap. But even the deepest shade had a sultry feel. Off to the north a great bank of white clouds was piling higher and higher.

"I wish it would rain," she thought, "and cool things off."

The more Chicken Little tried to sleep, the more restless she grew. The flies bothered and the bees were humming noisily in the clover patch just beyond the orchard. The dogs kept getting up and moving about to escape the flies or to find a cooler spot. Finally, she sat up in disgust.

"It's no use—I shan't go to sleep in a thousand years this way and it is 'most time for me to make that lemonade," she groaned.

A glimpse of the waters of the pond furnished inspiration. "I know—I'll get into an old dress and take a bath."

Leaving the comforter to its fate, she hurried to the house and gleefully put on an old dress and also an old pair of shoes, for the ground was burning to bare feet. The water of the pond was warm despite the fact that it was fed a dozen yards farther up by the icy spring stream. Jane waded and dipped luxuriously, practising her swimming strokes in water safely shallow, for she had never succeeded in going very far unaided.

After a time this sport palled. She caught sight of a flat feed trough some ten feet long with sides only a few inches high, floating on the other side of the pond. It made a tempting looking raft. She and Ernest had often paddled round on one of these. They were rather unmanageable craft because any considerable weight would submerge them for several inches. She had never navigated one alone, but she promptly decided to try.

Hunting about till she found a board that would serve as a paddle, she ran round to the other side of the pond and propelled the old trough from the bank till she pushed it past the deeper water. There were one or two holes a little beyond her depth. When she thought she was safely past these, she stepped up on the end of the raft with distinctly

unfortunate results. As her weight came down on one end, the other climbed neatly skyward snilling her into the water. She was none the worse for the ducking. Hurriedly wringing the water out of her hair and wiping it out of eyes and ears, she made a second attempt to step aboard her craft. She was careful this time to select the middle, and beyond settling a trifle so the water flowed gently around her, the old trough played no more pranks. She paddled clear across the pond and began working her way idly back, finding it difficult to keep the trough headed straight and free of entangling tree roots along the bank.

She made the trip safely two or three times to her own satisfaction, and the distress of a brood of half-grown ducks who didn't enjoy having their afternoon dip interrupted by this huge moving thing. Jane decided to let her raft drift, and stretched out lazily to watch them. The ducks swam in a long line for awhile curving in and out like a figure eight. Then they scattered and began diving and preening themselves, sending showers of sparkling drops into the sunshine. Often they would chase each other or dive and stay an instant under water, coming up some lengths away.

The clouds were still piling higher and growing darker. Occasionally the sun was obscured for minutes at a time. Presently, a little breeze sprang

up. It felt deliciously cool blowing against the wet folds of her calico dress. Jane had quite forgotten the time of day or her promise to carry the lemonade to the field.

The ducks soon lost their fear of the trough and swam all around her. She amused herself tossing bits of stick to them. They thought she was trying to feed them and came swimming, searching the water and jostling each other greedily.

When she tired of this she tried to paddle the length of the pond. At first she was careful to keep on the shallow side, but as she grew more expert, this caution began to seem unnecessary. Besides it was much easier to keep to the center of the pond. At the farther end she sent her craft with such force she ran her bow into the mud. Then she had to get off and shove from the bank to work it loose.

The wind was freshening rapidly, roughing the whole surface of the water into ripples. She found it harder to steer on this account. As she neared the deeper water she saw something moving among the water grasses on the farther side. She thought it might be another duckling. But when it came clear of the tall green stems, she saw it was a water snake—not a large one, not more than eighteen inches at the most. Jane was not actually afraid of it, but she hated snakes and wished it would go

back to the bank. But the snake came swimming sociably toward her.

"Pshaw, he's just crossing the pond—he won't come near the raft," she said to herself.

She eyed his mottled brownish gray length anxiously. He was coming uncomfortably close, his uncanny bead eyes apparently fixed directly upon her. She transferred her broad paddle to the water on that side and splashed and shouted: "Shoo!" loudly. The snake veered a little but did not seem frightened by this demonstration.

Chicken Little knew that none of the snakes in this region of Kansas were likely to attack a person unless they were interfered with in some way. And there were few poisonous ones among them. But as this bold little reptile came closer so she could see the markings, he looked like a water moccasin. These were poisonous and occasionally ugly. Her father had warned her against them. Chicken Little didn't care to have him for a neighbor especially in the water.

The water came well up around her body as she sat on the flat shallow trough. The wind was rolling up tiny waves that broke splashing over it. And the clouds were growing quite black—an ugly greenish black. Here and there forks of lightning shot through their frowning masses. It was surely going to storm—very very soon. The chickens on

the bank above were seeking shelter under a shed. Some calves in the corral a short distance away, bawled desolately. The little ducks had all left the pond. Jane suddenly remembered the lemonade. "Oh, dear! It must be way after four!" She consoled herself that the storm would surely drive the hands all in from the hay field and she could have it ready for them when they came in.

For an instant she forgot the snake. Apparently the snake had not forgotten her. It was coming straight toward her not over twenty feet away. Chicken Little *was* frightened. She had never known a snake to act this way. Again she flourished her paddle and churned the water while she yelled. Again it veered a little off its course though still swimming in her general direction. All the terrifying stories she had ever heard about snakes revenging themselves for the loss of their mates, popped into her head. Perhaps the hired men had killed this snake's mate that noon, and it was coming to get even with her.

Chicken Little was plucky and did not often lose her head. Frank said, because it was securely screwed on her shoulders. She decided promptly she had had enough of rafting for one afternoon and hastily headed her unwieldy craft toward the bank. Paddling as hard as she could, she swung the long trough half round. The farther end nearly hit the

reptile and this time it made a considerable detour. But it persistently headed back again.

She was floating into shallow water now and plunging her paddle straight down till she reached bottom, she gave the trough a tremendous shove forward. Unfortunately, she had not been paying much attention to her steering. There were snags and an old stump or two in the bed of the pond, which had been made artificially by damning the spring stream. She crashed straight into one of these with disastrous results.

The trough shivered, and the front end leaped a foot or more into the air, throwing Jane into the water not six feet from the moccasin. The snake was quite as astonished and scared as Jane, it swerved sharply and lost no time in putting another six feet between them.

Chicken Little got to her feet sputtering and waded ashore, while the forsaken trough righted itself and floated gently off. The water was well up above her waist and her progress was slow. When she gained the bank and clambered joyfully up it, she saw the snake leave the water a few feet distant and hurriedly wriggle into the hole for which it had evidently been bent all the while. Its instinct had warned it to seek shelter from the coming storm.

Everything was growing strangely dark about

her. The wind came in great gusts and the thunder pealed over head. The storm might break before she could get to the house. Looking over toward the lower meadow she could see one of the teams headed for the lane. Hastily wringing some of the dripping water from her dress, she started to run. Before she could reach the road, the wind was blowing a hurricane and branches were crashing down from the trees all around her.

Clouds of dust enveloped Chicken Little as she reached the level above the spring stream. Eyes and nostrils and her entire face smarted from the impact of the myriad fine particles driven by the wind. She turned and backed against the gale to avoid this. Close beside her a half-grown chicken was lifted from its feet and caught up into the air uttering frightened squawks. It was growing darker and darker, a ghostly twilight almost continuously lit by vivid flashes of lightning that seemed to shoot straight into her face. The roaring rush of the wind drowned every other sound save the crash of the thunder.

She found it almost impossible to keep her footing. Her wet dress clung about her limbs clammily. It took all her force to move against the gale. She began to make her way from object to object, clinging to trees or fence or sheltering an instant to get her breath in the lee of the stone smoke-house.

Chicken Little had never known such a storm. They often had fierce winds that swept great dust clouds over the prairies and threatened to lift the very soil from the plowed fields in the spring. And she had heard the blizzards roar and moan on winter nights and shake the walls of the frame house till she imagined her bed rocked. But she had never been out in such a storm as this. It must be a cyclone! What if it should carry away the house?

Little by little she fought her way to the lane. Praised be, the house and cottage were still standing. She clung panting to the old rock fence and strained her eyes to see what damage had been wrought. Presently, she caught the sound of wheels and her father drove up with a group of the haying hands. He was overjoyed to see her.

"Thank heaven—dear—you didn't come to the—field—I—was afraid——" The doctor gave up trying to explain in despair. The wind fairly blew the words out of his mouth. He had put his arm around her and was helping her toward the house while the men took the team on to the barn.

Mrs. Morton was anxiously watching for them at the window. She opened the door just wide enough for them to enter and held it with all her weight. The pile of papers and magazines on the

center table went flying in all directions. The door into the dining-room banged to.

"Whe-ew!" sighed the doctor with evident relief, "My lungs feel as if they had been crushed in with a sledge hammer! It was blessed luck you didn't start to the field, Jane. I was terrified lest you had, and Calico had bolted—or you had been knocked down by some of the falling branches. The lane was so strewn with cherry boughs we could scarcely drive through. It is a regular tornado though I think we are on the edge of it. We could see what looked like a whirling mass, off on the prairie to the right. We'll hear of a lot of damage to-morrow."

"Where on earth were you, Chicken Little?" demanded her mother. "I called and called when I saw the storm coming up. I was terribly frightened seeing the branches falling and the lightning striking so close, for fear you were hurt. Is Frank in, Father? [No? Then maybe you'd better go over to Marian. She and Jilly are all alone—she'll be nervous. Why, I've never seen such a storm!"]

Chicken Little was not only breathless but thoroughly chilled, for the wind had cut through her wet cotton dress like a knife. Her mother hurried her into dry clothes and gave her a dose of hot ginger tea which she loathed above all medicines.

The wind was beginning to subside, but the rain was pouring down now, in torrents. The play of lightning was still almost incessant. Chicken Little always shuddered when the thunder broke close at hand.

"I'm not a bit afraid of lightning," she complained, "but the thunder's awful—keeps kind of warning you something dreadful's going to happen."

Mrs. Morton was busy making some hot coffee to be ready for the men who would surely come in wet and chilled.

"After they have been perspiring so, too, this hot day. I shouldn't wonder if they took frightful colds. Afraid of thunder—nonsense, Jane, it's the lightning does the damage. There! Listen, wasn't that close? I shouldn't wonder if that struck the big oak down by the spring. It is the tallest tree anywhere around here."

Jane went to the window and watched the rain pouring from the spout on the ell and the torrents running down the paths and along the lane.

"Why, Mother, the road looks like a river. I believe the water is a foot deep. Guess we won't hear anything more about the drouth this year."

"Yes, the rain is a mercy—though it will spoil some of the hay. I think your father has most all he has cut, stacked, though. He hoped to finish this

evening. But I am afraid the wind has done great damage."

"There comes the other wagon. Frank is on it—and Jim Bart—and one other man. I wonder where the rest of the men have gone."

"Home, possibly—especially the ones who live near by. They must be anxious about their families."



CHAPTER III A · LITTLE · BIT · OF EVERYTHING

CHICKEN LITTLE was wrestling with "that horrid Latin" out on the porch toward evening a few days later when her father drove up the lane waving a letter. She raced with the dogs to get it. Huz beat her by several laps. She climbed up on the step of the spring wagon with such shining eyes and pink cheeks that Dr. Morton realized with a thrill of pride that Chicken Little was growing positively pretty. The next moment he was seized with a twinge of regret because she was growing up so fast.

Chicken Little reached for the letter.

"Oh, it isn't for you! How many kisses will you give me for some very good news?"

Chicken Little promptly hugged and kissed him so vigorously that he could hardly drive. But the team of bays were tired from their trip to town.

They jogged along to the gate and stopped of their own accord.

"Here, I said kisses, Humbug. I didn't ask for any bear hugs! Well, the Captain and Sherm are coming tomorrow. You won't be glad to see them or anything, I suppose."

Chicken Little jounced up and down on the spring seat to relieve her feelings.

"Oh, I'm just crazy to see Sherm—and the Captain! And, Father, what do you think the Captain is bringing me?"

"A lay-over for meddlers, most likely or a Latin grammar. The Captain is too wise a man not to bring you something useful." The doctor teased lovingly.

"Pooh, the Captain always gives me something be-u-tiful, and you know it! I'm getting so big you can't fool me any more, Father Morton."

"Oh, can't I? Well, perhaps since you are such a wise young lady, you won't care to hear the other piece of news I've brought."

"What is it?—something about Ernest?"

Dr. Morton smiled quizzically.

"I bet it is—oh, is he coming home?"

The doctor still smiled.

"Oh, he is! I just know he is! When—tell me when, quick, Father."

"No, you are a long way off. It isn't about

Ernest at all. It has something to do with a young lady who is not a thousand miles off at this particular minute."

"Me?" Chicken Little wrinkled up her brows till her father declared she would need a flat iron to smooth them out.

"Is it about my going to Centerville?"

The doctor shook his head.

"About school?"

Another shake.

"I thought you were such a wise person."

"I'm not going with Mother to see Ernest?"

"No, dear, I can't manage that this year and I think you would enjoy a visit to Annapolis much more when you are a little older and Ernest a little farther along in his course. You see a midshipman isn't much pumpkins at the beginning of his Youngster year. Wait till he gets to be a mighty Second Classman."

"I s'pose it would be better. I was awfully disappointed at first about not going with Mother, but I don't mind much now. But what *is* that news?"

"Give up?"

"Nope, not till I guess three times more. Mrs. Webb has invited me to come and stay in town with her for a few days."

"Ice cold."

"It's a party. Mamie Jenkins?—she said she was going to have a watermelon supper and have a lot of the young people out from town."

"You are so far out of the road you'll have hard work to find your way back."

"What can it be? It was something you learned in town. Did it come in a letter or did somebody tell you?"

"You were to have three guesses but nothing was said about asking questions. You won't guess it in twenty or a hundred guesses because it is something that has never happened to you before. Furthermore, Calico is invited too." The doctor laughed at Jane's puzzled face. "Now, are you so sure you can guess?"

"Calico! It must be some sort of a riding party or picnic."

"That guess covers a good deal of ground but it hardly touches this, though there is riding in it. Give up?"

"I hate to, but if it is something I've never done I might as well."

"Uhm-m! Come to think of it maybe I'd better consult Mother before I tell you." The doctor's eyes danced like Chicken Little's own, when she was up to mischief.

"Father, you mean thing! Tell me, pretty please.

Here!" She gave him two kisses, one on his cheek and one just brushing the tip of his ear for the doctor had pulled up and started to get out of the spring wagon.

"Hand me down those parcels and perhaps I will. Look out, the paper is a little torn on that sack of beans."

He made her wait till, with his arms full, he was starting for the house. He stopped after a few steps as if he had forgotten something. "There is to be a big political rally at the fair grounds next Wednesday. The Honorable Stewart Woodford is to be among the speakers and the young girls are to ride in the procession and represent states of the union. The mayor asked me if you wouldn't be one of them."

"Oh, what fun! Do you suppose Mother will let me? Would I have to ride Calico clear into town? And I have an awful tear in my riding skirt."

Chicken Little was planning it all out then and there.

Mrs. Morton wasn't so sure about it when the question was laid before her. She did not like the idea of her young daughter appearing in a public parade. Dr. Morton disagreed with her.

"It isn't as if it were in a city, Mother. Half the prominent citizens of Garland will be in the parade themselves. And the other half will be so busy

picking out the members of their families and their friends in the procession, that they won't have time to notice Chicken Little."

"Of course, Mother," added Frank, "we know you think your own particular baby will be the only person really worth looking at, but there may be others who consider their own offspring superior also. Chicken Little's freckles might possibly attract the crowd, but I promise to protect her if anyone tries to use scouring brick on them."

Jane rewarded him for this championship by making a face at him.

"Here, don't try being coquettish, Sis, or I'll take back my good words. I think I can trust my young sister to be a lady and to conduct herself so she will not attract notice. Better let her go, Mother. Father is on the reception committee and will be in one of the carriages just ahead. The chicken has had a lonesome summer—she will enjoy the excitement."

"Well," replied Mrs. Morton still hesitating, "I suppose she will be one among so many—who are some of the other girls selected, Father?" Dr. Morton named over half a dozen names.

"They are among the nicest girls in Garland, Mother, and several of them are old enough and dignified enough to keep the rest straight, eh, Humbug?"

"Mother, I'll promise to do just as you say, if you'll only let me—please, please, Mother!"

Chicken Little slipped her arm around her mother's neck coaxingly.

"Here, Sis, no bribing!" put in Frank, who held the idea that children should not be affectionate for the sake of wheedling favors out of fond relatives.

"I wasn't bribing!" protested Jane indignantly.

"I guess I hug Mother lots of times when I don't want a single thing—so there, Mr. Smarty!"

"Nice reward I get for taking your side," complained Frank pretending to be hurt.

Mrs. Morton had been going on with her own thoughts. "You would have to have a new riding skirt—the old one is torn and getting gray. I think the basque is perfectly good. What day did you say the rally was to be?"

"Wednesday—you have five days for fixing any extra frills. Guess you'd better let her go, Mother," Dr. Morton replied.

"She really ought to have a new riding hat." Mrs. Morton was still considering.

"No, they are to wear white caps all alike with the names of their state on the band. The committee is to furnish these."

"Well, if Father thinks best, I suppose—you must be very quiet and lady-like, Chicken Little. And

promise me you won't try to make Calico show off."

"Calico's color will show him off all right. Sis needn't exert herself."

"Oh, I wish I could ride Caliph this time. He'd be more stylish for a parade. I've ridden him lots lately—couldn't I Father?"

"Most certainly not!" her mother replied firmly. "A parade is no place for a skittish horse."

"Better let well enough alone, Sis," warned Frank.

"Besides, Calico would feel hurt to have his beloved mistress go back on him the first time he has a chance to show off." Marian had been discreetly silent until now. "What's the matter with poor Calico?"

"Why nothing—I love him dearly—only—well Caliph is handsomer and he holds his head so daintily and lifts his feet as if he were trying to dance. Calico is dear, but he's more a little girl's pony."

"And since a little girl is to ride him that is quite appropriate, little daughter. We won't discuss it any further. If the matter is settled, Mother, I'll drop a note to Mr. Owens that Jane will ride. Is supper most ready, I'm starved?"

Chicken Little went to bed in a fever of anticipation that night. With Sherm and the Captain com-

ing the very next day and this new and exciting adventure in prospect for the following week, she was all in a flutter.

"There's something wiggles inside me as if I had a pulse all over, when I get real excited," she confided to Marian. "What do you 'spose makes it?"

"You're too high strung, Jane—you get so worked up that you make your heart beat almost as if you were running. Mother is right, you must learn to quiet down and control yourself better. If you waste so much energy having thrills before your good times come off, you'll be too used up to enjoy them when they come. Go to bed and get a beauty sleep."

"Marian!" Chicken Little looked up wistfully.

"Yes."

"Do my freckles look so very bad?"

"Your freckles? What started you to worrying about them—oh, Frank's teasing? Nonsense, people will be too busy to know whether you have freckles or not. You might try a little lemon juice on them, but I'm afraid if you are to ride in the sun and wind you will have them all back with interest."

"Do you 'spose I'll always have freckles, Marian?"

"No, they usually go way when you're grown. I had them dreadfully till I was sixteen. Besides, I have heard people admire freckles—they're a sign of fine white skin. You mustn't pay so much atten-

tion to what Frank says. He adores to ruffle you, Jane,—thinks it keeps you from getting too conceited. Now go along to bed for Sherm's coming tomorrow."

Marian scolded Frank when he came in. "You are doing the very thing you don't want to, Frank Morton with your tormenting. You are making Jane think about her looks when she should be unconscious of them."

The next morning when her father called up the staircase, Chicken Little was dreaming. She dreamed that a large and vigorous family of lemons were riding horseback with white banded caps on their yellow knobs, and, alas, each lemon was plentifully besprinkled with brown blotches. Further, some kind soul had just told her these blotches were catching and she would probably take them from watching the lemons. Her father's voice mercifully rescued her. She presented a peculiar appearance that morning. Not content with rubbing lemon juice plentifully over the offending freckles, she had made a mask out of a piece of white muslin and soaked it in the acid stuff and tied it over her face. Her tossing during the night had displaced it so her nose protruded neatly through one of the holes cut for the eyes. Her hands were done up in old cotton gloves and more lemon juice.

Mrs. Morton, coming into the room while Jane

was still yawning and stretching, was surprised at her young daughter's remarkable appearance.

"What on earth are you trying to do, Jane?"

Jane wasn't sufficiently awake as yet to know what her mother was talking about. She had forgotten about her efforts at beautifying the previous night. She thought it should be perfectly apparent to her mother that she was stretching.

"I'm trying to wake up! What did you suppose I was trying to do?"

"Don't be impertinent to Mother, my dear. What have you got that thing on your face for?"

By way of reply Chicken Little sprang out of bed and ran to the round mirror on the old fashioned walnut bureau. She gave her face a minute inspection, then turned away discouraged. "There's just as many as ever 'cause I counted the ones on the bridge of my nose. Oh dear, I don't want to look like a fright."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Morton was mystified.

"These awful freckles! I don't want to look like a fright! I don't see why the Lord ever made freckles anyway."

"My dear, your freckles are not awful and a little girl should not be fussing so much about her looks. You are very sweet and wholesome looking and you should be thanking the good Lord for all

he has done for you, instead of harping on your freckles." Mrs. Morton gave her a kiss and hastened away to make sure that Annie had not forgotten to slice some peaches for breakfast. Raw peaches and cream were the doctor's favorite accompaniment of hot biscuit at this season of the year. He could never get enough of them.

Jane speedily forgot her freckles in the hurry of getting ready to go into town with her father to meet Sherm and the Captain. She always delighted in this long ride alone with Father. Dr. Morton was a great story teller and Jane would coax him into telling about his own boyhood and the doings of his favorite sister, who, he declared, had been a great belle in her day.

"Yes, Illinois was the far west in those days. Your grandfather used to make the trip by stage to New York once a year to buy goods, and he always brought sister and mother something handsome. She had one wine colored silk dress brocaded in silver, and a straw bonnet trimmed in ribbon to match. She was dark with fine big brown eyes—yours are a little like your Aunt Katherine's, Jane,—and she was a picture in that dress. I remember her waist was so small that I could span it with my two hands, boy as I was. It was a sin the way the women laced in those days. Why some of the girls Katherine knew used to loop their corset laces over

the bed posts and pull to draw them tight enough to suit them. No wonder they used to faint when they tried to run or had any unusual excitement. They didn't have room to breathe, it was a wicked fashion. That's why Father doesn't want his daughter ever to wear corsets. You can keep just as straight and be much more supple and graceful without them."

"But, Father, can't I ever wear them? The girls all say, people will think I am queer and old fashioned if I don't. I don't have to wear them tight as Aunt Katherine and her friends did. How funny and queer they must have looked with those wasp waists. I think that was sillier than anything we do nowadays."

"Well, you won't bind these firm young muscles of yours up in steel and whalebone with my consent, at any rate while you are growing. When you are actually a woman, I suppose you will have to decide such matters for yourself. But that sounds like the train whistle. It can't be, surely. You don't suppose my watch is running slow. No, I guess that is an extra freight on the Katy. But we must be driving along. That team on ahead looks like one of the Captain's—one of his men going to meet him probably."

"Won't it seem funny to Sherm to live at the Captain's when he comes back?"

"He will soon accustom himself to it. But going back to your Aunt Katherine, when you are sixteen I shall give you her ring and locket. I have treasured them ever since her death years ago, for my only daughter. I hope, dear, you will develop into as good and lovely a woman as she was." Dr. Morton's face grew tender.

"Oh, Father, you mean that lovely old locket with the border of gold leaves—and the tiny diamond ring—really for me!" Chicken Little came down on the spring seat with an enthusiastic bump.

"Really for you, Humbug, as soon as you are steady enough to take care of them."

Jane was considering.

"Father, don't you think I might wear the locket sometimes this winter if I'd be awfully, awfully careful. I've just been pining for a locket. Almost all the girls in Garland have some kind of one. Of course I shouldn't dream of asking you to buy one, with me going off to school and Mother's trip and everything, but when we've got such a beautiful one right in the house—couldn't I, Father?" Jane coaxed her prettiest and her father smiled at her quizzically.

"I'd be just as careful—truly. And besides, if I wore Aunt Katherine's locket it would remind me all the time what a lovely girl she was and it would be a lot easier for me not to say 'Golly' and interrupt, and—and forget to be a lady. Honest-to-goodness

it would, Father." Chicken Little was wheedling artfully.

Dr. Morton threw back his head and laughed. "Got your case all studied out, have you, Kitten? Well, I'll tell you, if those Latin lessons are really learned for the next two weeks I might consider letting you take the locket for state occasions. But we must be driving along or we shall be late for that train. I want to stop a moment at Mrs. Webb's to leave the basket of peaches Mother sent in to her."

While Dr. Morton carried in the fruit, Chicken Little sat out in the spring wagon to hold the bays. Mamie Jenkins, who was visiting her aunt across the street, spied her and came running over for a chat. She was elaborately arrayed in a ruffled white dress that put Jane's pink gingham decidedly in the shade. Mamie was patronizing as usual.

"I thought maybe you were going to stay in for the party tonight when I saw you drive up to Mrs. Webb's. I'm going—with Grant. He said he hadn't seen you all summer. Weren't you invited to the party?"

Chicken Little did not like Mamie. "You know Mother won't let me go to grown-up parties, Mamie Jenkins. I've come in with Father to meet Sherm and the Captain. They are coming on the three-twenty."

Mamie cocked her head archly. "Going to meet a boy! Why, Jane Morton, and you brought up so properly!" She pointed an accusing finger.

Jane was so indignant at this insinuation that she flushed hotly.

"I'm going to meet the Captain. I guess I can't help Sherm's being with him when he's his very own son," she protested.

"Well, you needn't get so mad about it. I was just teasing. But I guess you think it's funny yourself going to meet a boy, or you wouldn't have flared up so quick—so there, Miss Lofty." Mamie was always ready with the last word and it usually left the hearer uncomfortable. She gave her ruffles a flirt and departed disdainfully back to her aunt's porch.

But the day was spoiled for Chicken Little. Mamie had painted the sun all over with dark spots of distrust. She had come to meet Sherm with no thought of there being any possible reason why she shouldn't. There wasn't any reason why she shouldn't, she assured herself stoutly. Mother knew about such things—and Mother was particular! For the first time in her life Jane rejoiced that Mother was particular. She began to feel that there were distinct advantages in being a "lady." She was sure she would have liked Mamie much better if Mamie's mother had been a little more particular.

Mamie was rocking vigorously across the way. Jane could see her white dress out of one corner of her eye. She wouldn't have looked at her for worlds. And Father was staying an age talking to Mrs. Webb.

Mamie began to sing. She chose her song with due regard to Jane; paraphrasing neatly. "My bonnie's been off on a journey. . . . Bring back, bring back, bring back my bonnie to me—to me-e!" She came out strong at the last.

Chicken Little pretended to be busy dislodging a horse fly from the right bay's flank. Presently Dr. Morton came hurriedly out.

"I didn't mean to stay so long—but my watch is nine minutes fast—we can just make the station nicely if the train is on time and it generally isn't."

Chicken Little was thinking—thinking hard. Of course Mother knew exactly what was nice, but then Mother was thinking of her as a little girl—and—perhaps. . . . She wondered if maybe Sherm might see it the way Mamie did—and think it queer for her to come. Sherm had said she was growing up. She didn't believe a grown-up young lady would go to the train to meet a grown-up young man who wasn't her brother—unless there was a crowd or something. Jane was growing uneasy.

Dr. Morton never drove the bays up to the station platform. He hitched them under the trees in a

nearby street out of sight of the passing trains. When he turned to help Chicken Little out she demurred.

"I believe I'll just wait here—it's so hot on the station platform, Father."

Dr. Morton looked disturbed. "Not sick, Chick-a-biddy? It has been hot today."

"Oh, no, I'm all right. I thought maybe the train might be late and I'd be more comfortable here." She did not look at her father, but he scanned her face anxiously for signs of possible fever. Chicken Little looked the pink of health. Her big brown eyes were clear and her skin was tanned and rosy from much fresh air and sunshine, but there was nothing feverish in its delicate flush. The doctor's mind was relieved as to her health but he was sadly puzzled to know what had got into the child. She had been eager enough to come along. Not having had the benefit of Mamie's remarks, he could not imagine why her mood had changed so suddenly.

"Why, I think you'd better come with me. You wouldn't be giving the Captain and Sherm a very warm welcome to stay back here. You know they haven't any home folks of their own to come to meet them. And it will be rather a strange home-coming to Sherm. He can't help having sad thoughts of the old home. And a child like you could do more to cheer him than their hired man or any welcome I

can give him. I am afraid my little daughter is being a little bit selfish to think of her own comfort rather than the dear friends' pleasure." Dr. Morton's tone was more and more disapproving. He could not understand this sudden caprice.

Chicken Little hated to have her father disapprove of her. He had always petted this only daughter who was also the baby of the household. He had always seemed to understand her rather better than her mother. But she felt sure he wouldn't understand this time. He, like her mother, would think she was just a child and an extremely silly one at that, to be getting such notions into her head. Chicken Little did not enjoy the notions herself, but Mamie had done her work thoroughly—they were there to stay.

"Please don't make me, Father. I'll be nice to Sherm all the way home, but I don't want to go to meet him, because——" The doctor was watching her still and she looked up in time to meet his kind distressed eyes. She faltered—she did hate to disappoint Father, "because—because I just can't!" She was on the verge of tears.

Dr. Morton did not argue the case further. The train was whistling at the crossing. "Very well, I must hurry."

The Captain and Sherm were pleased to see the doctor, but Sherm looked a little disappointed when

he saw there was no one else with him. The Captain expressed his regret promptly.

"Nothing wrong with our Jane, I hope. I had an idea she'd be on hand to welcome the old neighbor. Of course, I didn't suppose she'd care to see Sherm," he added with a fond glance at his recovered son. He had been counting on Chicken Little to help Sherm over the embarrassment of this homecoming. The wound of his adopted father's death, and his further bereavement in finding that Mrs. Dart was not his mother, had made the boy grave and sensitive. The Captain's heart yearned to bring back his old time gaiety. He longed for the sight of the boy's crooked smile.

Dr. Morton tried to cover the situation as best he could.

"Oh, Jane's as fine as a fiddle. She's got something up her sleeve as usual—some sort of a surprise I believe. She's not a hundred miles off, Sherm. If you'll go to the other end of the block and come up to the team from behind you might succeed in surprising her."

Sherm started up eagerly. "But the trunks——"

"I'll tend to them. Here's John. We'll let him have the baggage and ride out with the doctor."

Sherm held out his hand in greeting to the man, then sped away.

Chicken Little was sitting very quietly watching

for the party to appear around the corner from the station. She was huddled down rather dejectedly. Sherm thought, as he came nearer, that if she were planning a surprise it couldn't be a very pleasant one. He slipped up behind and reaching up, blindfolded her eyes with his hands. Then he was surprised, for he felt tears on her lashes.

"Why, Lady Jane, is this how you're glad to see us home?"

Jane had given a start and a little scream at the unexpected onslaught from the rear. She had been trying her best to wink back those tears. She had even pinched herself hard to distract her attention and keep herself from shedding more.

"Oh, Sherm, how you frightened me!" She smiled up at him delightedly through her tears, as he removed the imprisoning hands. Sherm beamed back.

Chicken Little seemed like home to Sherm. The sad events of the past months and the distance that divided them, had weaned him away from Sue and Grace Dart. He would always be fond of them but they no longer belonged to him. They were no longer his sisters and he could not bear, quite yet, to think of them in any other way. So he thought of them as little as possible. But Chicken Little had been with him through all his shock and grief and

he had come to lean on her affection. He was full of things to tell her now.

And Chicken Little, meeting his honest eyes and funny crooked smile, suddenly divined that Sherm was not thinking any such foolish nonsense as Mamie had been putting into her head. And she had been a selfish girl to be worrying over what he would think of her, when she ought to have been thinking about making him and the Captain happy.

She held out her hand shyly. But Sherm was concerned. He did not like to see tears in Jane's brown eyes.

"Come, tell your brother what's the matter. Bet a cookie it's Mamie again."

Chicken Little's face was tell-tale. She tried to change the subject.

"Mamie's all right. Tell me about Grace. Is she tall as I am?"

Sherm was not to be diverted.

"It was Mamie—or you'd deny instanter. What sweet thing has she been saying to you now? I'd just like to have the bringing up of that young female long enough to pound a little horse-sense into her empty pate. She's got so few brains they rattle around. Suppose she told you that nobody but children wore pink"—Sherm glanced at the pink gingham—"or that you ought to have French heels

—or that your hat wasn't becoming. But surely, Chicken Little, you wouldn't cry over things like that."

Chicken Little denied indignantly.

"Your guesser is out of order—she didn't say anything of the kind."

"But it was Mamie, and she did say something hateful." Sherm had a very direct way of pinning a person down.

"I didn't say it was Mamie. I was just silly—that's all. I guess I can be silly if I want to." She was recovering her spunk.

"You didn't say it wasn't Mamie either. And it isn't like you to be crying for nothing, Miss Chicken Little Jane Morton. I'm going to get this out of you if it takes a week. But here come the folks."

Dr. Morton and the Captain were rounding the corner laden with satchels. Jane jumped down before Sherm could help her and ran to give the Captain a contrite hug and kiss. She was thoroughly ashamed of having listened to Mamie.



CHAPTER IV THE · GREAT · DAY

EVERYTHING was laid out on the bed in the guest room the night before to be in readiness for an early start the next morning. They were to drive in with Calico hitched to the end board of the spring wagon. The new riding skirt was immaculate and much shorter than the old one had been. Dr. Morton insisted upon this for safety's sake. The steel buttons gleamed on the riding basque, and the white collar was as stiff as Dr. Morton's own. Riding whip and gauntlet gloves completed the outfit. Mother had said she might wind her hair in two braids round her head so it wouldn't flop. Chicken Little was rejoiced. She expected to look grown-up.

There was only one fly in her ointment—Captain Clarke's present had proved to be a dream of a blue

enamelled watch. It was open-faced and tiny enough to wear as a locket on a dainty rope chain of gold.

"I told you it would make you hum," said Sherm. "Chicken Little is fairly buzzing with delight."

"No, Sherm, she's purring," laughed Marian.

"No, she's spinning round like a teetotem. She'll start the watch to running backward if she doesn't look out." Dr. Morton had watched her joyful war dance with amused eyes wishing that grown folk could enjoy things as children did.

"Isn't it the sweetest thing? The blue's for the sea and the cunning anchor design on the back—oh, it's just too, too, too! I never can thank you enough, Captain Clarke. How did you ever come to think of anything so lovely?"

The Captain glanced at Sherm.

"Sherm remembered you wanted a locket and I had thought of a watch since you were going away from home. So we iust combined ideas. I ordered the case made with the blue enamel and anchor design when I first went to New York. We came near not getting it in time."

Chicken Little was wondering when she had told Sherm she wanted a locket. He must have heard her talking to Marian, or Katy and Gertie the summer before. Funny the way boys seemed to notice so much more than you thought they did. It was

lovely of Sherm to stow that idea away in the back of his mind all this time.

The locket watch was her very dearest possession. She had not had a single chance to wear it until today and now Mother declared it would be most unsuitable to wear such an ornament with her riding habit.

"But it isn't just an ornament, Mother, it's a watch. You can wear a watch with any kind of dress. I guess people need to know the time more when they are out riding than when they stay at home with the clock. Besides, I might be late if I didn't have any way to tell what o'clock it was."

"It is no use arguing, my dear, your father and I will see to it that you arrive on time. You are *not* going to wear that expensive watch on horseback and in such a crowd as will be on the streets today."

Chicken Little heaved a sigh of regret as she glanced from the brave array on the bed to the charming trinket which she had laid beside the habit just to get the effect. The blue would give such a lovely touch of color to the plain black habit. She sighed again and firmly resolved that if she ever had any little girls she would let them wear what they pleased—unless they wanted to wear their summer clothes in winter—or something dangerous like that.

A whistle outside interrupted her musings.

"Oh, there's Sherm!" She yodeled in reply and

sped down the staircase and out to the road, where the lad was holding in a fractious Indian pony.

The pony tossed his head and eyed Chicken Little wickedly as she came up.

"He's a new one, isn't he?"

"So new he hasn't learned his manners. Here, Imp, you must be polite to the ladies. Make your bow like a gentleman."

He drew the pony's head down. The spirited beast curvetted and tried to buck.

Sherm was quite as good a horseman as Ernest after his year's experience on the ranch, and he soon had his ponyship pawing by the gate again.

"I broke him all myself. He's a veritable limb of Satan too—threw me three times. But I think I am his match now if I'm watchful. Say, don't you want to get Calico and come for a gallop?"

Jane ran to ask her mother.

"Don't be gone more than an hour, Sherm," called Mrs. Morton from the front porch after she had carefully considered whether a short ride that evening would make Jane tired for the next day. "Are you sure that pony is safe?"

Sherm tied Imp securely while he went with Chicken Little to the corral after Calico.

"Say, Jane, what did Mamie say to upset you so the other day?"

Chicken Little looked up from under her lashes,

replying saucily: "For me to know and you to find out."

"I mean to—that's why I'm asking."

"Maybe it's none of your business."

"Maybe it isn't, but I've got it into my head that it is." Sherm scanned her face inquiringly. Jane was in a mischievous mood. She had not the most remote intention of telling him what Mamie had said. She would not own up to Sherm that she had been so silly for millions, though she meant to tell the Captain some day so he would not think she hadn't wanted to come to meet them.

"I think it had something to do with your coming to meet us." Sherm was uncomfortably persistent. "I asked Marian if anything had gone wrong with you that day and she said no, you had set off gay as a cricket."

"Much Marian knows," Jane evaded. She was alarmed at Sherm's uncanny gift of guessing.

"And I met Grant this morning and he said you and Mamie quarreled that day and that you wouldn't speak to her afterwards." Sherm watched the effect of this bomb.

It exploded all right.

"Why, the old fibber—it's no such thing. I haven't seen her since."

"Then you did quarrel? Ah, Jane, come 'fess up like a good girl."

"There isn't anything to 'fess. Mamie said something disagreeable—as usual—and I flared—as usual. Cope Calico—cope—Cali-co!"

They had reached the corral fence and Jane held out her lump of sugar and called the pony who was on the farther side. Calico was seldom proof against this bribe, though he often tried to keep from getting caught by reaching out his velvet nose, nibbling the sugar, then shying violently to one side when they tried to throw the halter over his head. But he had two against one this time and Sherm had the straps buckled in a jiffy.

"Isn't he smart?" Chicken Little leaned her head caressingly against the piebald's neck and looked across at Sherm.

"Indian ponies always are. Some of them are as crafty as a fox, but Calico has more character—he has never been tricky. Imp is."

Sherm was rapidly securing saddle and bridle. He gave a final cinch to the girth which unexpectedly slipped two or three holes. Calico had been swelling out to keep him from buckling it too tight. But Sherm had taken him unawares. He laughed and stroked the pony's ears.

"Thought you'd fool me, did you? And after all the taffy we've been giving you. Calico, I'm ashamed of you."

He held out his hand and Jane sprang to the saddle.

Sherm handed her the reins. "Going to 'fess, Chicken Little?"

"Sherman Dart-Clarke, if you aren't the worst pest!"

Sherm grinned at the accusation.

"What was it disagreeable that Mamie said?"

She shut her lips together firmly. Frank always declared she looked exactly like Grandmother Morton when she did this. Her mouth flattened into a red wavy line and she tied her brows into a bow knot.

"Jane, you don't look pretty when you do that."

"I don't care how I look! And I'm not going to tell you another thing so you can just quit your teasing. Talk about girls being curious! Boys are a heap worse!"

"Yes, you are!"

"I am not!"

"What'll you bet?"

Chicken Little seized this golden opportunity to be virtuous.

"It isn't nice for girls to bet and I mean to try to stop. You said girls ought to be different."

"I? When did I say anything like that?"

"Never mind when, but you said it just the same."

"My, but somebody's lofty tonight."

"I can't help it when you're so—so—prying."
Chicken Little made a little grimace.

Sherm was walking beside Calico with his hand on the pommel. When they reached the lane, he mounted Imp. They walked the ponies demurely as far as the turn in the lane that hid them from the house, then broke into a gallop. Mrs. Morton was always nervous if they set off at too rapid a pace.

They forded the creek in the yellow evening light, letting the ponies drink and splash to their hearts' content. Birds were chirping in the thickets and frogs croaking in the deeper hole beyond the bend in the creek. A fresh breeze soughing softly through the branches made faint rustling noises in the long grass on the bank above.

Sherm was staring into the mellow shadow of the woods.

"Do you know, I didn't find anything lovelier than this while I was gone, Chicken Little."

"I love the creek and the ranch. I'll be homesick for them and for all of you—when I go. Please give Calico a lump of sugar now and then, won't you, Sherm?"

"While I am here, but I shall be traveling almost as soon as you. Did I tell you we have decided on Yale? I never dreamed of going to Yale. I

always supposed I should go to one of the freshwater colleges near home. But Father is determined I shall have the best in the country. He does so much for me I don't feel real, half the time. I don't seem to feel at home with myself with a new name and a new father—an'—so much money. The Captain—I mean Father seems to be mighty well off."

The boy was still staring thoughtfully into the shadowy woodland, but he no longer saw the tree trunks or the leafy fastness of the interlacing branches. He saw his old home and the dear woman he had called Mother for so many years. He saw Sue and Grace—and his adopted father reading in the big rocking chair by the student lamp. There was the familiar worn place in the brown ingrain carpet and the broken gilt molding on one of the picture frames. He remembered the day he had carelessly dropped that frame. He had always intended to get some gilding and fix it up for Mother. He was wishing he had not forgotten that and so many other things Mother had asked him to do. There was a tenderly wistful look in his face when he started from his dreaming and turned to Chicken Little.

"Jane, I'm not just a Polly Pry about you and Mamie. You're the only sister I have left—and I don't want anything hurting you—and—I don't

want any busybody meddling. Mamie was—and you know it. Did she tell you it wasn't proper for you to come to meet me, because I wasn't your brother? I'd do a lot for you if I'm not your brother, Jane. And you promised me a part of Ernest's place. I sha'n't ever let you forget that."

Chicken Little met the boy's hungry eyes contritely.

"You won't ever need to, Sherm. I'm your sister for keeps. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried. Ernest used to say I was a regular burr."

Sherm's face lighted, then grew mischievous.

"Sisters ought to tell their big brothers things, oughtn't they, Chicken Little?"

"It isn't a bit fair for you to make me tell you, but I will, so you won't be imagining all sorts of things. Mamie did try to tease me. Of course she didn't know we were just like brother and sister—and I was afraid—maybe you'd think it wasn't nice for me to come—now I'm so big. I didn't want you to know I could be so silly. But Mamie has such a way of making everything go wrong inside of you—till you don't know what you think." Jane defended herself rather plaintively.

Sherm bristled. "I'd like to shake her! She's going to have a piece of my mind some of these days that she'll remember. Don't you ever pay any attention to anything she says! And the next time

anybody tries to put such notions into your head, tell me—I'll fix 'em!" Sherm glowered at the rippling water and the wooded bank threateningly.

Jane was sure she should not sleep a wink when she went to bed that night, she was so excited about the morrow. But she never wakened till her father called her in the morning. She was to drive in with the family in her habit and bring a dress along to change into after the parade.

They could hear the band playing a mile from Garland. She gave a delighted jounce.

"I feel like a whole brass band myself!" she exclaimed. "You know a band sort of bursts out as if it couldn't hold in any longer and sprays the music over everybody within hearing."

"There is something luring about a band, like the Pied Piper's strains," said Marian. "The children all flock after it and people always come to the doors and windows to watch it go by. I suppose it is the martial strains that stir us. Jilly Dilly, what does the music say?"

Jilly had been listening ecstatically. Living in the country she rarely heard a band. She was staring hopefully at the road to catch a glimpse of the players. She did not pay any attention to her mother's question until Marian repeated it.

"Moosic, e moosic say tum twick—bang!"

Bang meant fire-crackers to Jilly. And fire-crackers meant the Fourth of July. They all laughed at the way she had put her ideas together.

"Jilly has the secret all right," said Dr. Morton. "The reason we like a band is that we usually have a band only on festal occasions. It seems a picnic and fire-crackers to Jilly. To the Civil War veterans, it means the rush into battle and the paean of victory. It frequently recalls public funerals to me—the dignified sonorous strains of some of the funeral marches are very moving. But see the crowds gathering."

They were driving into the outskirts of Garland. The road ahead of them was black with moving vehicles. Every cross street seemed to be pouring a stream of wagons and buggies and horsemen into the town. Flags were flying from a majority of the houses, and the sidewalks were blossoming with white and gay-colored summer dresses. Several balloon venders were disposing of their wares and the bright bubbles floated and danced above the moving throng. Even the horses' heads were decorated with them. And few of the country beaux were too poor to present the girl beside them with the toy. Usually, she amused herself with it for awhile, then gave it to some longing child. Jilly had to have one immediately.

"Bet you want one yourself and won't own up, Jane," teased Frank.

Jane disdained to answer. She intended to be very grown-up today.

"Jane has her company smile on. She isn't going to muss it up with any childishness," persisted Frank.

"You might tie a red and blue one to Calico's tail if you think he isn't gay enough." Marian was basely helping Frank.

This was a sore point with Chicken Little. She thought Calico much too gay for a parade already.

"Stop tormenting the child," interposed Mrs. Morton. "Father, let's go to the post office first."

The post office yielded two letters—one for Marian and one for Jane.

"Oh, from Dick."

"Read it out loud," said her mother. Chicken Little was giggling over the contents.

"My honored and esteemed young friend,

Doesn't that sound well, Chicken Little? You see, Alice has been telling me that you are growing up. And now that you are coming to live in our happy home, I must treat you more respectfully. I chewed the ends off of two pens before I got that to my liking. Even now it seems a little like ice cream in February or frozen mercury. Still it sounds impos-

ing, doesn't it, Chicken Little? Alice and I are so tickled to have you coming that everything on the old place has got the fever. I caught one of the gables winking at me the other morning when your name was mentioned. What does that gable know about you anyhow? And the wistaria vines rubbing against the porch roof chant 'Chick-en—Lit-tle's—com-ing—com-ing.' You'd better hurry along. Alice has re-arranged your room six times already. Now, while I'm not stingy, I do hate to have the new furniture worn out before you see it. Katy and Gertie have trimmed up the gooseberry bushes in blue ribbons in your honor. Mrs. Halford has a new recipe for peach cobbler she's saving to try on you. Whom do you think I saw the other day? I didn't know him myself. I wonder if you would recognize him. See if you do. He is seventeen years old, six feet tall and thin, with very blue eyes and very black eyelashes and hair. Has a charming friendly smile. He wanted to know if it were true that Chicken Little was coming to Centerville to school this year. He looked as if I had made him a Christmas present when I said yes. Bet you don't know who he is—ungrateful girl to forget your friends! I'll have to stop, for Alice is calling me to supper. She always manages to put a quietus on my literary efforts. Hurry up and come. Let us know the precise hour and we'll come down the track and pull the train in the last mile. Yours till cooler weather,

DICK."

"How exactly like Dick," said Marian.

"How perfectly absurd!" said Mrs. Morton.

"He has as much imagination as Jane herself. Poor Alice will have her hands full with two of them. You must try to be helpful, Jane."

"Who do you 'spose that boy could be?"

"Perhaps, it's the young gentleman you slapped so affectionately when he ate up your candy—Johnny Thing-a-ma-bob, what was his name?" suggested Frank.

"Oh, maybe—but his eyes were black. I don't remember any other boy I knew very well."

"How about Pat?" queried the doctor.

"Oh, I wonder if the parrot is still living?" Marian exclaimed. "You must write and tell me, Chicken Little."

"I wish Dick had told who it was, but of course he wouldn't," grumbled Jane puzzled.

She forgot all about it during the remainder of the day, for one of Dr. Morton's friends came up to say that both he and Chicken Little were wanted immediately over in front of the Cottage Hotel where the procession was forming. Frank helped her on Calico and looked to the girths carefully himself, flecking off an imaginary bit of dust from the horse's satiny hide. Jim Bart had spent an hour washing Calico down and grooming him for the great occasion.

"All serene, little sister, you and Calico will both do us credit." Frank swung her tenderly into the

saddle. He was very fond of his only sister if he could not resist teasing her most of the time. "Hope you'll have as festive a day as you are anticipating."

The little main street was swarming with people. Candy and peanut venders had set up stands on every corner. The drug stores were driving a thriving business in soda water and pink lemonade.

"I am glad the saloons won't be open today," said Mrs. Morton watching the crowds thronging about the soda fountain.

"There will be some liquor sold on the sly but not enough to do much damage," Frank replied. "Looks as if the whole country had turned out."

In the meantime Chicken Little was feeling rather shy and embarrassed in the midst of thirty odd young ladies on more or less restless horses. She was the youngest but one there. The older girls were mostly strangers and paid but little attention to her. Now and then, someone greeted her kindly. Calico seemed excited too, and not at all inclined to tolerate any nonsense from these town horses. He gave a little bay a vicious nip when it edged too near. The bay's owner looked at Jane disapprovingly.

"I don't see what they let such children ride for," she remarked grumpily.

Chicken Little guided Calico into a more friendly neighborhood. She came up alongside a fat dark girl who made place for her with a smile.

"It's hard on the ponies waiting. But don't you just love a crowd? I wouldn't have missed this for anything."

Chicken Little was fascinated by the girl's hands. They were loaded with rings. She wore two bangle bracelets and one thin gold one, but there were no gloves to be seen. "How funny," she thought, "on horseback."

She saw one charmingly equipped girl on a well-groomed gray. Her habit was dark blue cloth and the habit basque fitted her like a glove. A smart little blue bow fastened her linen collar at the throat. Gray riding gloves and the white cap with "Maryland" printed on the band completed her costume. The trim habit seemed to express the girl exactly. Her brown hair was neatly braided and fastened close to her head. Her clear eyes and fresh skin and quiet dignified manner contrasted with the giggling and shrill excited talking of many of the band. Chicken Little watched for an opportunity to get near her. But she seemed to be very popular and was surrounded already. She asked the fat girl who she was.

"Oh, that's Judge Rand's niece from Maryland. She's visiting here for the summer. She's too tony for anything. I don't care for that stand-off manner myself, but there is something kind of specially nice about her you can't help noticing."

Jane watched her for several minutes rather wistfully. Whether her gaze attracted Miss Rand, or whether happening to glance in Jane's direction, she caught the younger girl's admiring look, was not evident. But she smiled at Chicken Little and crowding her gray aside a little to make room, beckoned to her.

Jane threaded her way over joyfully.

"Don't you want to ride with me? You seem to be a stranger to most of the girls also."

Chicken Little shyly thanked her. She could not for the life of her think of anything to say. But Miss Rand was quite equal to keeping up the conversation herself.

"I have a sister about your age at home. We are great pals. Do you live in Garland? I don't remember seeing you before."

By the time the procession started Jane felt entirely at home with Miss Rand. Calico seemed to like the new neighborhood, too. He was apparently trying to emulate Miss Rand's high-bred gray. Evidently the band music and the crowd stirred him for he arched his neck and lifted his feet as daintily as if he knew he were on exhibition. Caliph himself could not have done better.

Some of the girls were having trouble with their horses. It worried Chicken Little to see the children crowding so close to the horses' hoofs. The

mothers had put them in the front line so they could see, and the utmost efforts of the town marshal and his deputies could not keep them out of the way.

After the first block things went better. The horses fell into the measured pace more obediently and Jane began to scan the crowd for familiar faces. Suddenly something whizzed through the air and fell between the two horses immediately in front of her and of Miss Rand. An instant after it hit the ground, a sharp explosion followed, and every horse in the neighborhood danced or shied. Some foolish boy had thrown a fire-cracker in among the riders for a joke. It came near being a tragic joke. One horse on the opposite side of the street bolted, knocking down a woman in its path. The horse just ahead of Jane was almost past control. It kept dancing and backing into the spectators, who were fairly falling over each other to get out of its way.

Fortunately, Calico had quieted at a word, and she could give her attention to keeping out of the way of the frightened animal in front. All of a sudden, a three-year-old child caught sight of the red paper remains of the fire-cracker, and coveted it. Before anyone could stop her, the hapless baby had darted after it almost beneath the hoofs of the plunging horse.

Chicken Little uttered a sharp cry of warning but the little one paid not the slightest heed either to

her or to its mother's frantic scream. Jane's heart seemed to stand still for one awful second, then she had an inspiration. Turning Calico sharply, and clinging with one hand to the pommel, she bent far over and grabbed the child by the folds of its dress, lifting it clear of the ground. She was not a second too soon. The iron shod hoofs struck the very place where the baby had stood.

Chicken Little was not strong enough to lift the child to her saddle but she held it for an instant dangling in mid-air till some quick-witted man leaped forward and relieved her. Then she straightened up with a little gasp. My, how her arm ached! It felt as if somebody had been trying to pull it out of its socket. However, she did not mind when she heard the poor mother's cry of joy as her baby was put safely into her arms.

But the mother's cry was drowned in a great cheer which went up from the men and women, who had been breathless witnesses of Jane's daring act. Chicken Little never dreamed they were cheering her till Miss Rand said with a smile: "Wave your hand or bow—it's for you—don't you understand?"

"For me?" Chicken Little stared about her dazed.

"Yes, because you saved the baby—bow, child, quick before they frighten the rest of the horses!"

Chicken Little bowed as stiffly as if she had had

a ramrod thrust down her neck. Then someone who recognized her raised another cheer for her by name. Dr. Morton ahead in one of the carriages heard it and could not believe his own ears. It was passed along the street until it reached the remainder of the family who with Sherm and the Captain were waiting by the drug store in the next block.

Sherm's young ears caught it first. "Jumping Jehosaphat, what are they cheering Chicken Little for?"

"Good Lord—you're right—it is Jane!" Frank made a flying leap from the spring wagon and set off at the best pace he could make through the throngs. Sherm was already pushing his way toward the cheering. Marian had much ado to soothe Mrs. Morton who was terrified lest something had befallen Jane.

"Why, it can't be anything wrong, Mother, or they wouldn't be cheering. I only hope she hasn't been tempted to try to show off her horsemanship." Marian hated to have a girl make herself conspicuous as badly as Mrs. Morton herself.

Their anxiety was soon relieved for a friend came up with the story.

Sherm beat Frank by several yards in reaching Jane. He picked up the facts as he made his way along. His face was as full of affectionate pride as if she had indeed been his sister, when he laid his

hand on Calico's flank and smiled up at her. Words were impossible—the crowd was still cheering.

The moment he could make himself heard, Frank inquired anxiously, "You didn't strain yourself or anything, did you, Sis?" Reassured, he patted the aching arm. "You're true blue, dear, the family's proud of you."

It was all very gratifying, but exceedingly embarrassing, for the story went ahead of her. Friends and acquaintances kept recognizing her all the way to the fair grounds and would start a cheer or call congratulations. Jane began to wish the ground would open up and hide her. Miss Rand saw her growing distress and helped her out as best she could.

"Change places with me. If you are inside, so many people cannot notice you."

Even at the fair grounds her new fame found her out. The distinguished speaker wished to meet the young heroine. But fortunately Miss Rand had carried the young heroine home with her, with Mrs. Morton's permission to have dinner and to rub the strained arm with arnica.

Chicken Little forgot her exploit temporarily in her admiration for Miss Rand and her possessions. Anne Rand's dressing table was a marvel to her. And when that young lady laid aside her habit and dressed herself in flowered organdy with delicious

knots of rose-colored ribbon, over marvelous lace-trimmed petticoats, Chicken Little lost her heart completely. She hung on her every word and motion for the remainder of the afternoon.

When she did meet the distinguished speaker after his address, she acknowledged the introduction and replied to his congratulations and queries in an astonishingly good imitation of Miss Rand's manner, which both amused and touched that young lady. It was such an artless tribute.

The distinguished gentleman was very profuse in his compliments, but the one that really warmed the cockles of Chicken Little's heart was what he said about her to her father. She had the words by heart after one hearing. "You are to be congratulated, Dr. Morton, not only upon having a daughter so brave, but because she is also a most charming and dignified young lady."

She just couldn't wait to tell Marian—Marian who had cruelly assured her she was too young to be noticed at an Annapolis hop. And here was this famous man taking her for a grown-up young lady. Chicken Little's conceit was beginning to run.

Marian caught the point at once.

"Are you sure he wasn't near-sighted, Chicken Little?" she asked mischievously.

"You can laugh all you want to, Marian Morton, but he truly said it—ask Father if he didn't. And

Miss Rand wants me with her—and lots of the grown-up people talked to me today—so there!”

Marian chuckled till Jane was highly indignant.

“Chicken Little, you are a dear, and we are all bursting with pride over your courage and presence of mind—but—there are several things you have to learn still. Even a long riding skirt and doing up your hair can’t make a young lady of you for several years yet. You do look a lot older in that rig, but one doesn’t have to talk to you long to detect the fraud. My dear little sister, you are a charming little girl, why try to be a half-baked young lady before your time?”

But Jane was not convinced. Miss Rand kept her by her side all afternoon and she had more opportunity to see how a real young lady conducted herself than she had ever had before. Anne Rand was very sweet and popular and very thoughtful of those about her.

The first thing Jane noticed was that she was very different from Mamie. She was not restless and she made no effort to attract anyone’s notice—least of all the young men’s. Yet the very nicest people Jane knew, stopped to chat or linger beside Miss Rand. One young man wanted to hold her parasol. Another brought them lemonade. Miss Rand thanked them sweetly but never once blushed or “made eyes” as Mamie so often did. And she never

seemed to forget that Jane was her guest. She would draw her into the conversation with a gracious word. Chicken Little fairly worshiped her before the afternoon was over.

She watched Miss Rand's every move and tone so closely that by evening she had copied her tones and several of her little ways even more accurately than when she met the speaker. She ventured upon an occasional Southern drawl to the great amusement of the family.

"Pass Miss Rand the biscuits and honey," Frank remarked solicitously at their late supper after they reached home.

"I hope you enjoyed the day, Miss Rand. I trust you were not offended by our western crudities. A new country has so little time to acquire the refinements of living."

He waited gravely for an answer.

Sherm and the Captain had come home with the Mortons for tea. Sherm had expected to have the pleasure of rambling round with Jane after the parade was over, but she had deserted him completely for Miss Rand's society. He was decidedly piqued and half resolved to get even with Miss Jane Morton. He came joyously to Frank's assistance.

"Oh, I am cha-amed with the west, Mistah Moahton. It is such a wondahful country—so much space—and—and—grasshoppers." Sherm included

the whole family in a radiant smile. "Don't you—ah—think so, Mistah Moahton?"

Chicken Little bristled at having her new idol made fun of.

"She isn't that way at all—she's not the least bit affected—it's natural for her to talk so because there are so many darkies round all the time in Maryland. I think you're both too mean for anything!"

"Miss Rand is a very charming girl and I was glad to have you with her, this afternoon, dear," said her mother coming to her rescue. She thought Frank was inclined to overdo the teasing.

"Yes," said Frank more seriously. "Anne Rand is a charming girl because she is sweet and natural, but Chicken Little isn't being natural when she tries to copy her precise words and manner. Learn all the pretty ways you want to, Sis, but don't try to be a second edition of somebody else. We should miss Chicken Little."



CHAPTER V THE · PICNIC

FRANK came in two evenings later with a message from the Captain. "We are all invited over to a moonlight picnic in the grove. Judge Rand's family and some others from Garland are coming out."

Chicken Little pricked up her ears as the Rand name was mentioned. What was Sherm up to?

"By the way, Jane, your two special friends seem to be getting together. I saw Sherm holding a long conversation with Anne Rand in the post office, when I was in town today." Frank glanced over at his young sister inquisitively. "Miss Rand seems to be a fascinating young person sure enough."

Jane was fluting some freshly ironed ruffles with her fingers. She was entirely too busy to look up, but she colored a little. That awful boy! If he had succeeded in getting Miss Rand to notice him—she'd find some way to show him!

Mrs. Morton was doubtful about taking time from her sewing to go to the picnic. It was finally arranged that Frank and Marian should accompany Jane and she would stay at home and keep Jilly. Dr. Morton had been called away to a neighboring county. It was not likely he would return in time.

Chicken Little fussed all day as to what she should wear. She wanted to look her very nicest if Anne Rand was to be there. She also wanted to show Sherm. At first she decided on her best white dress, but her mother set her foot down squarely on this.

"Wear that delicate embroidery to the woods on a picnic? You must be daffy, child, to think of such a thing. Your blue gingham will be entirely suitable. You have worn it once, so it will have to be washed before it goes into the trunk, anyhow."

"But, Mother," Chicken Little was up in arms at the mere thought of appearing before Miss Rand in blue gingham, "there will be ever so many of the town folks there. I don't want to go if I have to look like a country jake."

"Well, I suppose you could wear the pink lawn. But how I am ever to get you ready to go away, if you muss your things up as fast as I can get them ready to pack, I don't see." Mrs. Morton looked really distressed.

Chicken Little didn't argue the case or give her an opportunity to change her mind.

"I'll go press out my pink hair ribbon right away."

It took her a long time to go to bed that night. Annie had told her that if she would wash her face in bran water, it would help the freckles and make the skin beautifully soft. Then she decided to anoint all her freckles with lemon juice. She had wasted a half hour begging her mother to let her put up her hair for the picnic, but Mrs. Morton sternly refused. As the next best thing Jane did it all up in curl papers. After washing her face three times in the bran water, she was disappointed to find that her skin seemed to present much the same appearance as when she began. She decided to make a poultice of the bran and water and keep it on all night. It was almost eleven o'clock when she finished all this beautifying. But she did not mind; she expected to burst upon an astonished world the following day as milky white and rose red as the princesses in the fairy stories.

But the combination of curl papers protruding from all sides of her head and sticky poultices on her face, did not tend to woo slumber. She lay and tossed and tumbled for another hour. When she did mercifully drop into dreamland, it was an uneasy restless sleep that was scarcely refreshing.

About two o'clock her mother was wakened suddenly by hearing her scream. Mrs. Morton rushed into her room and was genuinely alarmed by the

object that confronted her. A mask of reddish brown bags appeared on the pillow, framed round by a bristling row of curl papers. A portion of the eyelids and the white that gleamed beneath the fringe of dark lashes was about all the flesh that was visible to the naked eye. Jane's hands had entirely disappeared into bags of the same dark hue.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Morton. "What has that child been trying to do now?"

Jane was muttering in her sleep. She was almost suffocated by the poultices.

Mrs. Morton shook her impatiently. "Wake up, child, wake up!"

She half roused, muttering again unintelligibly. Her mother persisted until she was fully awake. Jane sat up and blinked drowsily.

Mrs. Morton held the candle down and inspected her peculiar face garniture at close range. Then she commanded sharply: "Get up and take those things off your face. They're enough to smother you a hot night like this."

"But, Mother, I—I——" She interrupted herself with a prodigious yawn which made her skin fairly crack where the pasty stuff had dried like a varnish. "I want to look nice tomorrow."

"Look nice?" Mrs. Morton uttered a sound that was like an indignant hen cackling. She reached down and plucked off one of the poultices which

Chicken Little had secured by an ingeniously contrived system of straps of calico. "I should say you did look nice. Here," she plucked off a second poultice and gave her a hand glass from the bureau. "If you think looking like a wild Indian is looking nice, you certainly ought to be satisfied."

Chicken Little took one look and cried out in dismay.

The new print had run, decorating her skin with a murky reddish brown. She certainly did look like a redskin.

"Oh, Mother, won't it come off?"

"I don't know—it depends on how strong the dye is. It may have to wear off. What possessed you to take a bright-colored calico like that? You should never use any but white rags next your skin. It will be a mercy if that dye doesn't poison you. Get right up and let us get it off as quickly as possible."

Chicken Little sorrowfully obeyed. Her hands had been plunged directly into the half-cooked bran and the color had only come off in a ring around her wrists. But her face! Disgusted as she was, Mrs. Morton could not help smiling grimly. It was a blotched reddish brown clear up into her hair and far down on her neck.

Cold water failed to make very much impression other than to lighten the color and even it up a trifle.

Jane was almost frantic. She could never go to the picnic—maybe it wouldn't all come off in time for her to go to Centerville." Her tears trickled down and removed a little more of the dye.

She was working herself up into a sad state when her mother scolded her sharply. "That will do! You brought this upon yourself—you can bear it like a woman—not a baby. I think hot water and soap will take the rest of it off. But I shall have to go down and make a fire at this time of night to heat some. I certainly hope this will be a lesson to you."

Mrs. Morton departed in a most exasperated frame of mind. She returned about fifteen minutes later with a bowl of steaming suds. Chicken Little had been scouring industriously during her absence and had succeeded in uncovering a few white patches to her great relief.

Her mother worked for ten minutes more before the last brown streak was vanquished. When they had finished their labors Jane's skin felt like a nutmeg grater and smarted painfully from the excessive soap and vigorous scrubbing. Mrs. Morton was not inclined to comfort her with any promises that it would be all right in the morning, but she anointed her plentifully with glycerine and sent her back to bed.

Jane was sure she shouldn't sleep another wink.

But she did—several thousand winks. Her mother let her sleep the following morning and she came sheepishly down about ten o'clock. Her skin was a trifle redder than usual. Aside from this it did not seem to be injured by her experiment. Her chief concern now was lest her mother should tell Frank, and he should tease her to death or pass the joke on to Sherm. Not for worlds would she have Sherm know about it.

Mrs. Morton replied shortly that she had not told Frank, but she had mentioned her midnight séance to Marian. She did not know whether Marian had told him or not. Marian and Frank had driven over to a neighboring ranch on an errand.

Neither Marian nor Frank mentioned the matter when they come home and she began to hope that Frank had not heard. Her curls came out beautifully. But her nose was still reddened slightly and she had some fine red dots almost like a rash, on her chin. The pink lawn was not as becoming as usual. But she had not dared ask her mother to let her wear something else. She saw Marian smile as she inspected her.

Marian was looking like a veritable woods lady in a cool green and white striped percale with a simple straw hat, trimmed with a green band, resting on her heavy dark braids. Chicken Little wondered what Miss Rand would wear.

Jane found her a vision in lavender batiste when they arrived at the Captain's. She wore a shade hat of shirred lavender mull to match, with a white water lily set on the drooping brim.

The party had gathered about sundown. The guests left their hats and heavier wraps at the house, when all had gathered, and wandered down the woods road to the walnut grove. Here the picnic supper had been spread by Wing's deft hands on long rustic tables made of boards, built under the trees. Swings and hammocks had been put up and lap robes and some strips of carpet laid down. It looked very gay and festive.

Sherm had smiled rather knowingly at Jane when he greeted her, but he had little to say. When the party started to the grove, she noticed he was walking beside Anne Rand, carrying her white wool cloud and talking with unusual animation for Sherm.

"Of course," said Jane to herself, "he would be nice to his guests—and she would be nice to him because she is his guest."

Miss Rand had greeted her beamingly and talked to her for several minutes. But when she passed right by her with Sherm, she merely smiled and never once suggested that Chicken Little join them. Chicken Little would have felt rather left out if the Captain had not tucked her arm in his, and told her he was depending on her to be first mate on this

cruise, as these were new waters to him. There were no other young girls or boys present. But three of the young people who had been on their ill-fated sleigh ride the preceding winter, were there. She bowed to the two young men rather self-consciously. Of course, they thought her just a child.

She stayed by the Captain till supper was served when he had to do the honors by seating Anne's aunt, Mrs. Rand, on his right and another elderly lady on his left. Jane was left to slip in near Marian, where she felt a trifle forlorn.

Before the supper was over the moonlight was pouring through the woods in a silvery flood. The blue and red and yellow Japanese lanterns strung among the trees, looked like pale-tinted fruit beside the moon's brightness. It was a heavenly night. Everybody said so. "Only," Chicken Little said this last to herself dolefully, "what was the good of a heavenly night if you don't have somebody to help you enjoy it?" She would have been entirely content with either Sherm or Anne Rand, but Sherm had become Miss Rand's shadow, and Miss Rand seemed to like it.

Marian was watching her and decided to help out.

"Oh, Jane," she called, "Mrs. Rand and Mrs. Webb want to see the big spring. Won't you take them down? It will be a lovely little walk in this moonlight."

Jane was happy to have something to do. She led the way chattering busily to Mrs. Webb about the High School, and Centerville, and Alice and Dick. Mrs. Webb was interested in Jane and asked all manner of questions. And Chicken Little picked the smoothest path for the ladies and looked after them so well they were enthusiastic in her praise. This was all very pleasant. Still she had not expected to spend her time at her very first moonlight picnic entertaining old ladies.

The fairies surely had planned the night. They came to one open glade full of nodding golden rod and purple asters. The wind made nice creepy little noises and the moonshine forced each feathery grass stem and quivering leaf to throw its lacy shadows across their path.

Mrs. Webb stopped to drink it all in.

"If we could only preserve such beauty like peaches and get it out whenever we needed a little cheering up," she sighed, then laughed at the absurd idea.

"It makes me think of Jessica and Lorenzo's pretty love scene in the Merchant of Venice. Have you read it, Jane?" asked Mrs. Rand.

"You mean the one that begins: 'in such a night' and 'the moonlight sleeps on yonder bank'? I've read that lots of times—I love it." Chicken Little's

face lighted. "I always like the romantic scenes best of all in Shakespeare."

"Wise young lady—so do I," a man's voice startled them from among the trees."

All three jumped and Mrs. Rand gave a little cry.

"I beg pardon—I did not mean to startle you. I set out to hunt the spring and lost my way." Mr. Martin, a young lawyer of Garland, came into view through the bushes and bowed, smiling.

"May I be permitted to join the wood nymphs?" he asked with mock gallantry.

"Jane can play nymph to your faun, Mr. Martin," said Mrs. Rand, "she's made of fairy stuff herself and knows no end of woodland lore."

The young man turned to her gayly: "What is your pleasure?" he asked.

"The Captain has a boat over on the big water hole. We might have a ride after we see the spring," replied Chicken Little.

"I fear I am a little too substantial for a row-boat these days," said Mrs. Webb. "What do you think about it, Mrs. Rand?"

"Well, I am timid on the water. And two's company. Suppose you and I follow the path back to the grove after we all see the spring and let these young people take the boat ride."

Mr. Martin rather insisted upon escorting them

back to the picnic ground, but Mrs. Rand declared the path was perfectly plain and they could see the lanterns shining through the trees. So after they had enjoyed the lovely little dell with its stream tinkling into a tiny rock-lined basin, the ladies started back, and Jane led Mr. Martin by a short-cut through the timber to the big pool.

He was evidently in a humor to enjoy himself. He took off his hat and let the breeze blow through his hair. Every few steps he stopped her to show her some exquisite woodsy nook or to assure her solemnly that he was positive there were fairies hiding under that burdock. He was most chivalrously polite, holding back the branches for her to pass and helping her over fallen trees or rough places in the path. Jane never remembered being so solicitously taken care of. Presently, he began to tell her about a hunting trip during the preceding summer in the Canadian Rockies, and of the wonderful moonlight nights when they had stalked big game up the mountain trails.

He had had some rather perilous adventures which he described vividly. Chicken Little forgot her surroundings and found herself stealing along rocky chasms to slip up on a mountain goat, or watching by the pools where the deer came to drink—it was all so real. She gave an actual sigh of relief when he finished a hair-raising experience. Mr. Martin

laughed delightedly. "What an adorable little listener you are! You would certainly enjoy going hunting yourself."

Jane told him about hunting prairie chicken and quail. "I love the out-doors and the excitement—my heart fairly stands still when I pull the trigger—but I can't enjoy killing things."

"That gets me occasionally, too," he confessed. "I never could see why nature was arranged for one species to prey upon others. But I must not be bothering you with such problems. The Creator probably has several excellent reasons for making things the way they are, that He hasn't had time to mention to us."

"Still, I think it's all right for us to wonder about things, don't you?" said Jane earnestly.

"Surely, else why were we given minds? But to wonder, need not mean to worry, as many excellent people do. Do you like to study out things for yourself, Miss Jane?"

She glanced up at him shyly. "Yes, but I don't often tell anyone about what I think—because they laugh at me."

"You are in luck if they merely laugh. Usually the other fellow tries hard to make you think precisely as he does—especially in religious matters."

"Then you think we have a right to think our own thoughts about religion, too?" Jane was very eager.

The young man noticed her interest and studied a moment.

"I think it is surely perfectly right for us to think pure and kindly thoughts about any subject under the sun—the wrong thinking is not what you think about, but how you think it—see?"

Jane was not quite sure that she did see. She studied awhile before replying. "But if you don't think the way your father and mother have taught you—about—everything? Is that wrong?"

"Here, what are you leading me into?" Mr. Martin regarded her quizzically. Chicken Little was very much in earnest. His face sobered. "I guess that's the question that bothers all boys and girls when they begin to think. It's a stiff one. If the children always thought exactly as their fathers and mothers there would be no such thing as progress. We'd have no railroads—no public schools—no post offices. I guess about the best answer I can make, is this: it is all right to disagree with your parents, if you are sure you are honest about it. But we owe it to them to do as they think best at least till we are grown up. For their longer experience of life helps them to see many things we overlook. Possibly, when we are their age we will see things more as they do."

Chicken Little loved his "we." It seemed to put her right in Mr. Martin's own class.



Jane trailed her hand in the water

They had reached the pool by this time and Mr. Martin helped her in and untied the "Chicken Little." He did not fail to notice the name lettered on the bow.

"That is what they call you sometimes, isn't it? Miss Rand spoke of it and thought it such a jolly nickname."

"Oh," said Jane, "isn't she just lovely?"

Mr. Martin glanced up ruefully. "She is—all that, Chicken Little—may I call you that? I like it."

He rowed out into the center of the pool with swift long strokes, then rested on his oars.

Jane trailed her hand in the water catching at floating leaves and sticks.

"Chicken Little, I'm going to propound a serious question to you. I want a little feminine advice—unprejudiced advice. Will you please answer me quite frankly?"

Chicken Little nodded eagerly, proud to be taken into his confidence.

"If a—if you were a man and a girl told you she wouldn't marry you unless you moved to a larger place, would you move?" Mr. Martin laughed at her bewildered look, but he gnawed at his mustache nervously.

Chicken Little found this too much of a poser to answer promptly. She picked three leaves and four

twigs out of the water before she ventured a single word, then she said firmly: "No, I wouldn't!"

Mr. Martin sat up a little straighter and looked inquiring.

"Good,—why wouldn't you?"

"Because—why if she didn't love you enough to want to live where you lived, why she'd be fretting all the time anyhow."

"That sounds alarmingly reasonable," sighed Mr. Martin. "It seems to simmer down to a question of marrying a fretting girl or no girl at all."

"Maybe," said Jane, "she might change her mind." She was wondering if the girl could possibly be Miss Rand.

"She might, but she doesn't betray any symptoms."

"Pooh," she said, "she wouldn't let on."

"No," he said considering, "I don't suppose she would. Maybe she is just trying me out anyway."

Jane was following her own line of thought. "I wouldn't want to marry a man I could boss," she volunteered solemnly.

Mr. Martin laughed cheerfully. "Right you are, Chicken Little, and by the same token I don't mean to be bossed myself. Much obliged, I shall take your advice to the letter which isn't often done. You should feel complimented." Mr. Martin took up the oars again and rowed her entirely around

the pool. Chicken Little began to hum some old darkey melodies.

The singing evidently attracted someone else's attention, for presently they heard twigs crackling on the bank near by. A moment later, Sherm and Miss Rand came in sight. "Want two passengers?" demanded Sherm when he saw who it was.

Chicken Little saw that Miss Rand rather hung back. But Mr. Martin promptly brought the boat to the bank, and held out his hand to her.

"Don't be afraid, Anne, the water isn't deep."

Sherm and Chicken Little both rather stared at the "Anne." Miss Rand being a stranger was usually addressed by the Garland young people as Miss Anne, if not Miss Rand.

She let him help her over to the bow of the boat. But Chicken Little could see her face color even in the moonlight. It was *she* he meant—she just knew it was. Jane was all aquiver to help poor Mr. Martin. To think of knowing about a sure-enough romance—she would write to Katy the first thing in the morning. Then Chicken Little had a real inspiration.

"I guess maybe I'd better be going back to the grove—I didn't tell Marian—she might be anxious." She forgot her pique at Sherm, in this wonderful new excitement. "Would you mind going

along with me, Sherm? You could come right back."

Sherm was not in the least anxious to relinquish this wonderful young lady who smiled on him so sweetly, to anybody. Still he could hardly be rude to Jane. They set off up the bank at rather a brisk pace. Chicken Little could not resist glancing back. If she expected to surprise a love scene she was disappointed. Mr. Martin was calmly rowing and Miss Rand was staring off into the moonlit woods.

If she could have heard what Mr. Martin did say when he finally got ready to be sociable, she might have been satisfied.

"Anne, I've thought it over precious carefully, and it can't be done. Garland *is* a small place but it is quite important politically in the state. The boys have promised to send me to the legislature this fall which is just the start I want. It wouldn't be Garland for keeps—dear—can't you trust me?"

Jane didn't see anything more of either Mr. Martin or Miss Rand until just as they were leaving. Then she felt two hands creep round her neck and Anne Rand kissed her tenderly. Mr. Martin stood smiling down on her.

"It worked, Chicken Little, worked like a charm," he said.



CHAPTER VI CENTERVILLE. · AGAIN

“A PENNY for your thoughts, Chicken Little.”

She had been curled up in a big chair staring thoughtfully out the window at nothing for full fifteen minutes. Dick had been watching her and thought he recognized the symptoms. Chicken Little was homesick. The picnic now seemed very far away indeed, and Sherm and Miss Rand and the others in the misty past. She had been in Centerville a week and had started to school that morning. Mrs. Morton had gone east the preceding day, and Alice had warned him that they must keep Jane busy till she was acclimated to being away from Mother. So he decided to plumb the state of her feelings when he discovered her in this reverie.

Chicken Little came to with a smile. “My thoughts, why I was thinking——” She hesitated. “They aren’t worth a penny, Dick. You’d lose money.”

"Which means you consider them so valuable you wouldn't part with them for such a trifle. A cent and a half."

Chicken Little shook her head.

"Two cents?"

Another shake.

"A nickel?"

"I didn't suppose I could think a nickel's worth. Um-m!"

"Dime?"

"Nope."

Dick fished in his pockets. "Here it is. I knew I had an irresistible bait." He held up a dime with a hole in it.

Chicken Little grinned mischievously. "All right, if you will bankrupt yourself. I'd have told you for nothing if you'd waited long enough. I didn't want to tell you because it sounded like criticizing—and I do truly love everything, but——"

"Out with it. Is it the natives' manners or their food you take exception to?—— Or don't you like the view?" Dick was getting downright curious.

"The idea! It's only that everything seems so much smaller than I remembered it. I thought the house was bigger and the terrace seemed bigger—and Centerville—why, I remembered Centerville as five or six times as big as Garland. And it isn't more than twice as big—if it is that."

Chicken Little's face looked positively injured at the trick her recollection had played her.

Dick threw back his head and roared.

"Perhaps, it's rained so much since you were here that everything has shrunk in the wash, Chicken Little. But maybe, perhaps, it is because you have grown since the other Centerville days. Things were bigger in proportion to the little girl. Besides, you hadn't seen much of the world to measure by. Now you are trying to compare our precious village with your big prairies. Don't, Chicken Little, you'd lose us on a Kansas prairie."

"I s'pose that is the reason. Only I was disappointed. Today when I went to school the building wasn't at all as I remembered it. I thought it was bigger than the court house at home."

"And we've put a whole wing on since you went to school there, too. I tell you, we'll furnish you with a magnifying glass and you can go round looking at things through that till you get used to our insignificant size, Jane!" Dick assumed an air of mock distress. "Don't, don't tell me, sweet creature, that Alice and I have shrunk in your estimation, too?"

"Dick!" Chicken Little protested. "Of course not!"

"My life is saved," declaimed Dick, dashing away imaginary tears. "Think what a strain on our

friendship it would have been, if we had been obliged to start growing again to satisfy you. Oh, by the way, Jane, have you seen the youth of the black hair and blue eyes yet? I bet he is big enough to please you."

"Why, no. Of course, I didn't see everybody this morning. You have to stand round such a lot the first day of school being registered and getting your program arranged. I saw lots of girls and boys I had forgotten all about, and some of them had grown so I never should have recognized them. You see I don't see everything small, Dick Harding. But please, Dick, tell me who is *the* mysterious boy? Katy and Gertie have teased the life out of me. And I've guessed every single person I ever knew—I'm positive."

"Chicken Little, I wouldn't spoil the surprise you are in for, not even to get that dime back, and I assure you I miss the hole in that dime like fun. I don't suppose he was in school today. He is clerking and this is his last year in the High School—he may not be there till next Monday."

"What are you teasing Jane about now, you bad boy?" demanded Alice, coming in.

"My dear wife, can't I give the inquiring youthful mind a little good advice without your suspecting me of teasing?" Dick was all injured innocence.

"Jane, he is younger than you are—don't you take

his advice—come to me. I am the only real font of wisdom in this household.”

“Alice, who is this boy you are all teasing me about?”

“Boy, why, I don’t know unless it’s——”

Dick was shaking his head menacingly at her and she paused to consider.

“Oh, I really don’t know. Dick will have to tell you.”

“I was just saying when you interrupted Alice, that there is no vice so greatly to be deplored in very young ladies as curiosity. Your sweet flower-like minds should not——”

Dick’s flow of eloquence was suddenly punctuated by a sofa pillow Jane had aimed nicely at his head.

He hurled it back, grumbling: “That’s always the way. Here I am giving you valuable advice free of charge, and you scorn it.”

“I am going upstairs and study my algebra before supper,” said Jane to Alice, making a face at Dick by way of reply.

“Dick, you wretch,” said Alice as soon as the door closed behind her, “what have you been tormenting that child about?”

“Well, you told me to keep her mind distracted so she wouldn’t get homesick and I ‘done gone done’ it. She isn’t thinking about home at all—she’s wondering who *he* is. She’ll keep on wondering till she

goes to school tomorrow—not a homesick tear—see!”

“Yes, I see you have a wonderful system, but what would Mrs. Morton say to your filling Jane’s head with a lot of sentimental nonsense?”

Dick was quite right. Jane was entirely too curious about this mysterious friend to be homesick that night. She finally came to the conclusion that there was no such person. It was merely a conspiracy Katy and Gertie and Dick had hatched, to fool her. She resolved she wouldn’t show the least interest in future when they mentioned the subject.

Coming back to Centerville certainly was delightful. Alice had fitted up her old room especially for her in soft blue. The deep dormer window, where she and Katy and Gertie used to play dolls, was furnished with a low cushioned seat with a shelf at one end for her school books and a darling writing desk close by. Alice Harding hadn’t forgotten the debt Alice Fletcher owed to the Morton family in general, and to Chicken Little, in particular. She meant to make this year a very happy and a very useful one to her.

“I’ll never forget, Dick,” she told her husband, “that the old home might never have come back to me but for her and you. I want her always to feel that she has a place in it.”

She had set Chicken Little to exploring and rum-

maging the day she arrived. "Go all over the house, Jane, open all the closet doors and see if you can squeeze through under the eaves the way you used to. I shouldn't be surprised if you would find some of your old playthings there still."

Mrs. Morton rather remonstrated about her giving Jane the freedom of the house in this way but Alice only laughed.

"Why, Mrs. Morton, you know a cat never feels at home till it has been all over a house. And I knew Jane would be curious to go back over every nook and cranny of the old home. That is the very first thing I did when I came back here to live."

"It is a dear old house," said Mrs. Morton. "There was always something homey about all these gables—and the open grates. I remember how Ernest and Jane loved the big closets running off under the roof—and the cozy nooks in the dormer windows. I am so glad you have kept the big wistaria vine."

"Why the old wistaria is part of the house. We wouldn't part with it for anything. Do you remember the time you came home and found the children all on the kitchen roof playing the Siege of Acre? Ernest climbed the wistaria to the main roof and jumped down on the kitchen roof. Dear me, Sherm and Ernest and Carol are all gone from here now and that was only four years ago. How

fast changes come! I certainly never dreamed that day that I should be married and living in the old place again myself."

Chicken Little found the schoolhouse the same and not the same. She had been in the grades before. It seemed very grand to be in the High School with the whole top floor all to themselves. Two of her old grade teachers had been promoted to the High School work. They helped to make her feel at home. She found she was with Katy in some classes and with Gertie in others. For the first time she was grateful to Father for keeping her at that awful Latin.

"I'm sophomore in Latin and history anyway," she said complacently. "It doesn't make me feel quite such a baby beside Katy. And I just love going from one room to another to recite, instead of sitting like a bump on a log at one desk all the time. Oh, I just know I'm going to love high school!"

By the end of the first week everything was running nicely. She could even get home for dinner and return to school in the all-too-short noon hour without hurrying unduly, though Alice had hard work to keep her from bolting her food for the first two or three days.

She had several arguments with Alice. The third day she came down late to breakfast. The cause

was all too apparent. Instead of a neat braid tied with the usual ribbon to match her dress, she had an elaborate mass of tiny braids wound round and round at the back of her head; the general object being apparently to cover as much of the back of her head with as flat a mat of hair as possible. She looked decidedly self-conscious. She knew, and she knew Alice knew, that her mother did not approve of her doing up her hair before she was sixteen at the very earliest.

Chicken Little was tactful. She apologized sweetly for being late and began an animated tale of her doings at school the day before to Dick. She avoided meeting Alice's eye. So she did not see Alice lift her eyebrows at Dick or Dick's grin and shrug in return.

Dick couldn't resist opening the ball himself. They had pancakes for breakfast—nice lacy brown pancakes. Presently the maid brought in a fresh plateful with a dark brown one on top.

"Why that looks almost burned," said Alice.

"No!" said Dick, "it's just a nice chestnut brown. Why, Chicken Little, it is almost the color of your hair. Say, do you know I have an idea? The right flap of that hair pancake you have constructed so beautifully seems to me a little flatter than the north-east section. Why not use this pancake to help out? You could double it and insert it neatly underneath."

Dick's face was perfectly serious. He was regarding the back of her head thoughtfully.

His expression was too much for Alice. She giggled. Jane grew red. She had a beautifully prepared line of argument to convince Alice that it was perfectly right and proper for her to put up her hair—now that she was in the High School—and part sophomore, too. She and Katy had worked it out together. Katy said none of the older girls or boys would look at her if she wore her hair down her back in a braid like a kid. But she had not expected to be made fun of. Chicken Little hated to be made fun of. She wanted awfully to make a pert answer to Dick but she couldn't, for the life of her, think of anything pert to say. And the worst of it was both Alice and Dick were watching her closely to see what she would say. She finally got her wits together to retort in a tone she tried hard to have unconcerned. "No, thank you, I prefer my pancakes inside."

Dick made no reply for a minute. He continued to stare thoughtfully at her coiffure. "Um-n, if it isn't a pancake, Jane, just what is it intended to represent—architecturally? It looks—I have it—like one of my grandmother's braided rugs. You haven't a headache, have you? If you are afraid of draughts, I think I could lend you my old skating cap."

Jane was growing decidedly uncomfortable. She knew the battle was on, but she didn't know precisely how to meet this unforeseen form of attack. She decided to be frank.

"You can tease all you want to, Dick, but the other girls all wear their hair up and I don't want to be different—and babyfied."

"Does Gertie wear her hair up?" demanded Alice, "or Grace Dart? or May Woodward?"

"No-o, but——"

"What girls in your class do?"

This was a hard question. Most of the freshies didn't wear their hair up as a matter of fact. She didn't know the names of the few who did, and didn't admire them much anyway.

"Why, Alice, I don't know their names but there are several; besides, I'm almost as much sophomore as freshman."

"I can tell you the names of three of your class who do," pursued Alice inexorably. "One is Annie Smith. Poor girl, her father is a drunkard and she has never had money to buy hair ribbons. She used to use pieces of string. I don't blame her. Another is Sarah Bates, who is seventeen years old and so stupid, she will never be anything but a freshman—I wonder what merciful teachers ever passed her along that far. Aurelia Snodgrass does her hair exactly like yours, and she is fast, and none of the

mothers I know are willing to have their daughters associate with her."

"But, Katy," protested Jane feebly.

"Katy has teased her mother until she has consented to let her try it. Mrs. Halford is hoping she will soon tire of it. Besides, Katy will be sixteen before Christmas. You are still fourteen."

"Well, I don't see what harm it does."

"No actual harm, perhaps, Jane. But you are trying to appear something you are not. Further, you would be grieving your mother and putting her in a very bad light before her old friends. She wants her only daughter not only to be well bred, but to dress and conduct herself as if she were well bred. Nicely brought up girls of fourteen don't try to dress and act as if they were seventeen or eighteen. I shall not forbid your putting your hair up or doing any other freak things that come along, Jane. But I shall be awfully disappointed in you, if you do. But you'd better hurry off to school now or you will be tardy."

Chicken Little swallowed hard to keep back the tears as she left the table. But she went meekly upstairs and arranged her hair in the usual loose braid. And her hair seemed to approve the change for it crinkled into all sorts of goldy brown lights as she went out into the sunshine.

She had still to face Katy—Katy who had spent an

hour the preceding evening instructing her in the mysteries of fashionable hairdressing. She was in hopes she was late enough to miss her this morning. But, no, Katy hailed her as she went by. She saw Katy glance at once to her braid, but she didn't say anything. An instant later Jane was surprised to see that Katy had her hair down, too. She wondered, but she also kept discreetly silent. She did not feel anxious to pursue the subject of hair at this particular moment.

Gertie relieved her curiosity later in the morning.

"Father made such a fuss, she had to take it down. He said it was all foolishness for a half-grown girl to be wasting her time that way. He said if Katy was so anxious to spend a half hour on her hair every morning, she could put it in brushing it—that would do some good. I'm awfully glad you didn't put yours up, Jane. I truly think it's a lot prettier this way. I didn't like to say anything when Katy was teasing you too."

Katy didn't mention the matter for several days, then she remarked carelessly: "Cousin May's just home from Chicago, Jane, and she says it's a heap more stylish for the young girls to wear their hair in a loose braid like yours. And I was noticing that Sarah Bates this morning— isn't her hair a sight?"

Chicken Little agreed joyously and the subject was dropped for eight months and twenty-two days

when the sophomore party came off. But that is a different matter.

The following Monday Chicken Little fluttered down the hall to the cloak room with the comfortable feeling that she belonged and knew exactly what to do. She had all her lessons learned, and was wearing her traveling dress, because her mother had told Alice she might as well wear it to school part of the time since she would probably outgrow it. She felt specially elegant in her traveling dress. Most of the girls didn't have traveling dresses. She had on a lovely cardinal hair ribbon, too, that she had never worn before.

Already she knew a number of the girls in her class and a few boys. It was pleasant to walk down the long corridor nodding to this one or exchanging a few words with someone else. It meant more to her than to most of the girls, because she had lived on the ranch for four years with nothing but the country school—and so had very few friends of her own age. Here, there seemed to be girls and girls to choose from.

She was trying to walk along very sedately—as became a part sophomore, but she was so happy her feet would skip a little in spite of her. Suddenly an utterly strange voice at her elbow called softly: "Chicken Little—oh, Chicken Little!"

She swung round like a flash. She had particu-

larly instructed Katy and Gertie to call her Jane at school. She did not always want to go by a babyish name like Chicken Little. And they had both tried faithfully. But here was Chicken Little overtaking her from a new source. She looked into the speaker's face rather petulantly. Then her amazement grew. She was staring into the bluest pair of eyes fringed by the blackest lashes she had ever known a boy to have. And the eyes were smiling at her in the most delighted fashion. Yet she was sure she never had seen this particular boy before in all her life.

He was taller even than Ernest and much broader shouldered. He was neatly dressed, and held his hat in his hand with a charming little air of deference. Of course, it must be *the* boy! But now that she had seen him she didn't know who he was any more than she had before. She was staring at him in utter bewilderment.

The boy seemed to be enjoying her surprise. "Sure, and you don't be knowing me at all," he laughed, "but I'd a known you anywhere. Though I couldn't easy forget you with the parrot calling Chicken Little every time I come near his cage."

"Why, it's Pat!" Chicken Little was both delighted and disappointed. She was glad to see him, but to have this hero of romance she had been building air castles about for several weeks turn out to be

merely the poor ignorant Irish boy she had never cared much about, was—well, disenchanting. It was like finding out your locket was only gold plate.

Her face revealed her mingled emotions only too plainly but Pat did not seem offended. He shook hands very politely and stood beaming down upon her.

"I've taken mighty good care of Pete," he said.

Then there was a pause. Pat evidently expected her to say something and she couldn't seem to think of anything to say. Finally, she managed to tell him she hoped Pete hadn't been too dreadfully much trouble. She was so astonished at Pat, she didn't feel much interested in the parrot just at this moment.

Pat's face sobered. "I can't ever thank you—for—for trusting him to me. Maggie thought the world of him. When she was sick so long—she didn't mind the pain so much when he was on the bed by her. He was so funny—and—human—his talking you know—and Mother had to be away with her work. When she died——"

Pat paused and a little spasm of pain clouded his face for an instant.

"He was a great comfort to Mother and me," he ended simply.

Chicken Little's face grew tender with sympathy. "I didn't know—I never heard. I'm so sorry, Pat."

She put out her hand impulsively and Pat gripped it as if it were truly comforting.

"Maybe, you haven't heard about Mother either." The boy's blue eyes were misty.

"Why no, she isn't——"

He nodded sorrowfully.

"Most two years ago. It was Maggie's going—and she took cold—quick consumption, the doctor called it. Since she died I have lived at Dr. Gridley's. They've been mighty good to me and let me go to school and earn money for myself in summer. I take care of his horses and do chores for my board."

"And you haven't anybody—of your own, Pat?"

"Sure," said Pat with a swift smile, "I've the parrot. Mrs. Gridley let me keep him. He sleeps in my room at night, but she likes to have him down in the sitting room in daytime. But perhaps, you'd be liking him back." Pat eyed her a trifle anxiously.

"No, indeed. He wouldn't remember me—and he'd grieve himself to death to be separated from you when you've been such chums for so long," Chicken Little responded heartily. She was a born comforter and seldom at a loss for words when anyone needed cheering up.

Pat looked relieved.

"I'd like to bring him round to see you, if you wouldn't mind." He said this a little diffidently.

"Oh, do, couldn't you come this evening?"

"No, I have to work evenings—beside getting my lessons, but I'd come Sunday if you'd like. Right after dinner—would that be bothering you?"

Pat relapsed into his boyish brogue a trifle when he was excited or embarrassed. The bell sounded and Pat hurried away. He was a senior, and his first recitation was in the principal's room.



CHAPTER·VII OLD·FRIENDS·

KATY and Gertie and Jane were out on the terrace under the apple trees awaiting the arrival of Pat and the parrot.

"I wanted to have a party for you right away, but Mother said I'd better let you get a good start with your school work first." Katy broke into a silence during which the three girls had been watching a caravan of ants coming down the apple tree trunk laden with some sort of ant merchandise.

"I wonder what it is?" said Gertie paying no attention to Katy.

"Looks like little white grains," replied Jane so interested that not even the prospect of a party could distract her. To be sure the party was not imminent.

"Well, I must say you girls are polite." Katy regarded them disdainfully. "If someone were kind enough to give a party for me, I think I could find time to show a little interest."

Jane came to with a guilty start. "Excuse me, Katy, I think it's perfectly lovely of you girls to do it for me, but the ants are so funny. See how they follow the leader. If he turns and twists they all do. They look like those pictures of caravans of camels in the desert in our old geographies."

"Or like the donkey trains climbing the Andes," said Gertie, who was busily engaged in blocking the ant trail with one finger to see what the ants would do.

"Well," said Katy loftily, "if you prefer those old ants to a party, I think I will go in and talk to Alice." She shook out her crisp white skirts daintily and settling her sash bow into exact nicety, departed toward the house with dignity. She glanced back after a few steps to see if the others realized how offended she was, but they were still intent on the ants.

Time had made more apparent the differences between the three girls. Katy was charmingly alert and piquant. Her gray eyes had a beady little sparkle almost like black ones. She was always self-possessed and had a retort ready. She had more style than any girl of her age in town and achieved most of it herself by deft little touches to her dresses and ribbons.

Gertie was very nearly her opposite, being gentle, dreamy and inclined to shrink from notice. Her

soft hazel eyes and clear olive skin made her lovely to look at. She cared very little for clothes and preferred to stick close to her old friends rather than to make new ones.

Chicken Little was taller than either of the Halford girls; brown-eyed, brown-haired, adventurous. The girls liked her because there was always something doing when she was around. But she still loved to go off by herself and read. She would read and read and read until her head was full of dream people, then oftentimes the book would slip down, and some member of the family, after fruitless calling, would hunt her up to find her leagues away building air castles in her own busy brain. She never told what these air castles were. They were usually not very original. They followed the last story she had been reading pretty closely. And she was always the heroine. And, perhaps, it isn't the best thing for young girls always to be heroines—even in their dreams.

Happily Chicken Little forgot all about her day dreams when she was with others and threw herself heart and soul into what was going on about her. Her chief charm was a little way she had of looking at people as if she were hanging on their words. She and Katy had arguments over this.

"You really aren't as interested as you look, Jane Morton."

"Why, I am, too, Katy Halford. I think that is a perfectly horrid thing to say. It sounds as if I were a regular hypocrite!" Chicken Little was most indignant.

"I never said you were a hypocrite. But you look at people so straight, and your eyes are so big—why they just think they're the whole cheese—especially the boys. You make them feel as if you were applauding every single minute." Katy was keen and quick to get to the bottom of things.

"Well, I think that's meaner than what you said before. If you think it's nice to make eyes, I don't. But I guess when folks are talking to you, you're supposed to look straight at them—you'd be rude if you didn't. I hate people who look out the window or down at the lace on your dress, when you're telling them something."

"You can get mad if you want to, Chicken Little—I never said you made eyes. I guess you've got the kind of eyes that make themselves."

Gertie felt it time to pour oil at this stage in the conversation.

"Don't you worry, Jane, it's nice to have pretty eyes. And you 'most always are interested in what people say—you don't have to pretend. That is one thing I like about you, Chicken Little. Some of the girls act so bored when you tell them things."

When the ant train reached mother earth after

its journey down the tree, Jane and Gertie decided they had better go in and make their peace with Katy. Jane was dismayed to find a big grass stain on the back of her white dress, while Gertie rose from the grassy terrace as immaculate as when she had seated herself.

"How do you do it, Gertie, you never seem to get stains or dirt on your clothes? And I 'most always do."

"I don't know," replied Gertie thoughtfully, "unless you do things harder than I do."

On reaching the house they discovered that Alice had quite restored Katy to a good humor by suggesting a hazel-nutting frolic after the first frost.

"You may have to wait till October, but it would be a lot more fun than anything else you could do at this season of the year. Do you remember the time we found the wild grapes and the silver and Father's bonds?"

"Don't I?" Katy exclaimed sitting up very straight. "That was the most thrilling time I ever had in my life. But nothing interesting ever happens any more."

"No," said Dick coming in just in time to hear her lament, "the world isn't what it once was!"

"Hm-m-n, I heard some very interesting news last night—something, that will please you all, but Chicken Little might be so excited she couldn't sleep

tonight. I think you'd better go outdoors and watch for Pat while I tell the girls, Jane." Alice laughed softly.

Chicken Little didn't waste time in words. She cast herself bodily upon Alice, settling down on her lap and declaring she shouldn't budge till she told cast herself bodily upon Alice, settling down on her chair and besought her to hurry.

"If you can guess whom it's about, I'll tell you. That is fair, isn't it, Dick?"

"It's about Ernest." This from Chicken Little.

"No."

"Sherm," hazarded Gertie.

"No."

"Has it anything to do with the party?" Katy's mind was full of her plans.

Alice shook her head, then reconsidered. "It might have—a good deal."

The girls were wildly curious. Even Dick looked interested.

"Give it up?"

"Yes."

"No!"

"Tell us—I just can't wait!" Jane began to tickle Alice to hasten matters.

"Here, that isn't fair!" Alice punctuated her protest with a squeal, and jumping up, tipped Jane off in a heap on the floor.

"I shan't tell you a thing except that someone you'll all be glad to see is coming tomorrow." Alice fled from further temptation and running up to her own room, bolted the door against the girls.

"Maybe your mother is coming back this way," suggested Katy.

"No, she isn't. I had a letter from her yesterday and she's going to stop in Cincinnati to visit some cousins."

Dick had been studying. He stretched his lips in a triumphant smirk.

"I think I know."

"Tell us, Dick."

"Please."

"Carol is coming home for his vacation and he gets in tomorrow. I remember his father told me yesterday. I meant to tell you, Jane, but it tee-totally slipped my mind."

There was a general squeal of glee.

"Oh-h!" Chicken Little's thoughts were a jumble of midshipmen in uniform and navy hops and Carol's letters and wondering if he would recognize her. Pat had, she reflected.

Katy wondered if they could have the nutting frolic while he was there, and Gertie if he were at all like the old Carol.

"Why, he's only been gone a year, Gertie Halford. He couldn't change very much in a year."

"He'll look ever so different in his uniform, anyway," protested Gertie stoutly. She was not in the mood to be snubbed.

"Well, I hope he isn't as fat and lazy as he used to be," said Katy.

"You'll find out tomorrow and in the meantime here's Pat and the parrot."

Dick smiled to himself as he went to the door. The girls' chatter amused him immensely.

"Hello, Pat, how is the world going with you? I am glad you brought the bird along. There are three girls in there and you wouldn't have the ghost of a show without some reinforcements. But I'll back Pete against the combination." Dick indicated the sitting-room door and betook himself off upstairs.

Pete lived up to Dick's expectations. He was perched on Pat's arm. Jane rushed up to greet her old pet. She cherished a secret hope that he might remember her. Pat was confident the bird had been faithful. But if Pete had any recollection of Jane, it was evidently not an agreeable one, for he promptly ruffled his feathers and screeched "Scat!" before she came close enough to touch him.

Pat was even more disappointed at this ungrateful behavior than Jane. He remonstrated vigorously, with such good effect that when Chicken Little

stretched out her hand again cooing persuasively: "Pretty Poll," he sat perfectly quiet contenting himself with looking at her fixedly for some time. At length he remarked morosely: "Go off and die!"

He was so funny they had to laugh, but Jane felt decidedly nettled to be so entirely forgotten by the pet she had once cherished so tenderly. And Pat was positively reproachful to the parrot. Pete evidently had no conscience if he had been provided with a tongue. He preened himself complacently in the midst of Pat's scoldings. He was much more moved by Jane's attempts at bribery. Coyly taking the bit of cracker from her fingers, he ate it deliberately with sidelong glances at her. When he had eaten it, he sidled toward her remarking amiably: "Chick-en Lit-tle, Chick-en Lit-tle."

Both Jane and Pat declared that this was proof positive that he recognized her. But as he had been taught to call Chicken Little whenever he was hungry years before, and Pat had never fed him a meal until he did, Katy's argument seemed reasonable.

"Pooh, he doesn't want you. He just wants more cracker. You go off and let me hold the cracker—he'll call you just the same."

Jane didn't want to, but Katy insisted and the perverse bird piped: "Chick-en Lit-tle!"

He evened the score with Katy, however, by advising her to "go off and die" the instant he had the cracker in his claws.

Have you taught him any new words, Pat?" Chicken Little asked.

"Oh, nothing much." Pat seemed a trifle embarrassed by the question.

"I should think you could easy, he's so bright," remarked Katy.

"He does learn fast. He learned to call the neighbor's dog himself. Mrs. Gridley saves bones for the dog and he always comes running. He gets so mad when he finds he's been fooled. Yes, you rascal, I'm talking about you."

Pete had been slowly climbing up Pat's arm to his shoulder. Now he was peering into his face coquettishly. Pat shook his finger at him. It acted like pressing the button. Pete burst into a perfect stream of admonitions.

"Get up—Pat! get up!—get up!—Lazy bones!—get—up—get up!"

They all understood now why Pat had been reticent about showing off Pete's new accomplishment.

"Why, he's a regular alarm clock, Pat. Does he Pat's face had grown decidedly red. really call you at the right time?"

"I am such a sleepy head," he said apologetically.

"No, he doesn't know when to wake me, but Dr. Gridley calls me every morning and Pete scolds till I get out of bed and talk to him. It works like a charm."

"Ever swear at him?" This from Dick who had come in again.

Pat grinned but didn't say anything.

"Here, Pat, I am going to find out whether you are profane." Dick went up to the bird and remarked in a conversational tone: "Damn."

Pete looked at him with interest. Dick said it again a little more emphatically. The bird cocked his head on one side and considered. Finally, he remarked abruptly: "Go off and die."

The laugh was on Dick.

"The court decides that you are not guilty, Patrick Casey. No wonder Dr. Gridley trusts you with his beloved blacks. By the way, what are you going to do after you finish High School?"

"Go into the store, I guess."

"Think you won't try for college?"

"No, I think I'm cut out for business—I'm not very fond of books. And they've offered me a permanent clerkship and a raise. I'm to have fifteen dollars a week," said the boy proudly.

"Good, but, Pat, you don't want to be a clerk all your life." Dick was trying out the boy's ambitions.

"I don't mean to. I have a hundred dollars saved

up already. After I learn the business I'm going to some bigger place and start out for myself—I've got a lot of plans, Mr. Harding."

"Why, Pat, you evidently mean to be a millionaire before you die."

The boy's eyes glistened but he did not say anything. Later that evening Dick astonished Alice and Jane by remarking apropos of nothing: "I really shouldn't wonder if he did."

"Who did what, Dick Harding? You do have the most aggravating way of going on with your own thoughts and then springing them on us."

Chicken Little was impressed with Pat's ambition also, but she did not like the slighting way he spoke of books. The Morton family were all great readers. Not to like to read, seemed almost as bad to her as not to like to take a bath. She felt she ought to remonstrate with Pat.

There was no opportunity till after Katy and Gertie had gone home shortly before tea-time. Alice invited Pat to tea, and set him and Jane to work to get it, the maid having her Sunday afternoon and evening off.

"They will have a beautifully sociable time cutting bread and setting the table. It always makes people feel friendly to fuss around a kitchen. Jane could do lots for Pat if she would. He needs to know a really nice girl well. Mrs. Gridley has taught him

many of the refinements of life already. He is polite and neat, but of course he is ignorant of most of the little social niceties, because he never goes any place except to mass and to school."

"Yes, the lad has never had any time to fool away. But you are right, he does need to go about among the young people. And Chicken Little is sympathetic and tactful enough to be a fine cicerone. Can't you put a bee in her bonnet, Alice?"

"You don't think Mrs. Morton would mind, do you?" said Alice, drawing her lip between her teeth, a sure sign that she was undecided. "She has very definite ideas about whom her children shall associate with."

"I most certainly don't think any possible harm could come to Jane from befriending Pat. He is a gentleman at heart—and that is the real brand. If Jane were eighteen you might feel that you should consult her mother—for young people do sometimes fall in love where they are not desired. But that sort of thing is still a long way off for her. And I hardly think Pat could contract an undying affection for a fourteen-year-old—though he has evidently idolized her ever since she gave him the parrot. Why is it that grown-up ladies have never realized the seductions of a parrot? Think what a beautiferous romance. Charming young miss sees gallant youth, gives him the one creature that can

talk faster than she can—youth is so touched that he falls at her feet, immediately if not sooner—and stays there, for fear the parrot will nip him.”

“Dick! You are the worst ever. You will ruin Chicken Little with your everlasting joking. I wonder Mrs. Morton would trust her in the same house with such a frivolous individual.”

Chicken Little was already actively engaged befriending Pat. She found it a very pleasant occupation. It was so very evident that Pat thought everything she said or did was exactly right. She led up to the books artfully.

Pat was telling her about a hunting-trip he had once taken with Dr. Gridley.

“I don’t care so much for the hunting, but I love the tramping and sleeping out—and the trees and sky and having all the breathing room a fellow needs. Say, if I ever have a house, I’m going to have big rooms and heaps of windows. I like space. I have always had to live sort of cooped up.”

“Oh,” said Chicken Little, “you ought to come out to the ranch—we have a thousand acres there. You can see for miles and miles over the prairies from the little hill behind the house. And in summer—when the wild flowers are in bloom—it’s just too lovely for anything! I know I’ll be just as homesick as anything next spring.”

“Whew! A thousand acres must be some farm.

I don't believe there are any that big round here. I'd sure like to see it. But I like woods and lakes mighty well too."

This was Jane's chance.

"Oh, you'd love the Leather-Stocking Tales then. Ever read any of Cooper?"

"Only some selections in the literature. I had that last year under Miss Burch."

"Oh, I've got her in history. Isn't she awful? She smirks so and says: 'My dear child,' in a soft-soapy voice when you know she's mad enough to chew nails."

"She is kind of mushy, I guess," Pat answered as if the idea were a new one. "But she sure was good to me. I didn't have much time for the readin', having to work you know. And I was getting behind the class. So she used to have me come every Sunday afternoon after Christmas and read the things with her. It made it a lot easier. We never had any books at home—I never got in the way of readin'! There's lots at Dr. Gridley's, but I always have to work or study till late—then I'm so confounded sleepy——"

Pat hadn't meant to let the confounded slip out. He colored guiltily.

Chicken Little laughed.

"I'll have to tell you about my swearing, Pat."

It took her some time to tell the story of her

introduction to the Captain. Then Pat wanted to hear more about the Captain and that led to Sherm. Pat had known Sherm pretty well during Sherm's last year in High School.

"Some of the boys wouldn't have anything to do with me, because I worked and was Irish," he confided to her. "But it never seemed to make any difference to Sherm. And the others kind of followed his lead after awhile. He used to come over sometimes evenings. He'd bring Maggie candy or apples."

"Why he never said boo about it to me." Chicken Little had been confident she knew all there was to know about Sherm.

"He wouldn't—he wasn't much of a hand to talk."

"But he told me lots of things——"

"Chicken Little," Dick's tone was sepulchral, "I am slowly starving to death for my tea while you two kids reminisce. Chicken Little, I didn't deserve this at your hands. Ah, this is something like!"

Jane had hurriedly thrust a plate of cake in his hands while Pat urged a dish of preserves.

"I'll have everything ready in a jiffy, Dick. The water had to boil before I could make the tea. Pat, will you get a pitcher of water?"

She bustled about until the simple Sunday evening tea was on the table. Pat's knowing Sherm had put

another idea into her head. He also knew Carol. She had a great curiosity to know what he thought of Carol. Chicken Little was thinking a good deal about Carol herself. Her memory pictured him a remarkably handsome boy, and of course now he had grown to man's size and wore a wonderful blue uniform, he would be—well, she expected nothing short of an Apollo. Not that Apollo meant anything very definite to her. She had seen pictures of the statue but never so much as a cast. Apollo merely meant something especially choice in masculine looks—you filled out the picture according to your individual taste.

The very fact that Carol was so delightfully vague in her mind gave her imagination more play, and made Carol seem more fascinating than any of the other boys she knew. She knew almost exactly what Sherm would do under any ordinary circumstances at least, or Grant Stowe, and Pat was so artlessly open and frank it wouldn't take long to know him very well indeed. But Carol, who was lazy yet somehow managed to pass the most difficult examinations, who didn't care for the girls, yet had all the girls devoted to him, promised real thrills. She wished again that she could be wonderfully beautiful and compelling like the novel heroines.

Alice protested when Chicken Little and Pat offered to do the dishes after tea, and sent them out

under the apple trees. Jane ensconced herself in the swing and Pat dropped down on the terrace bank near by rather awkwardly. He wasn't used to girls' society. His hands and feet seemed unusually big and clumsy. Often his voice would be a little hoarse when he ventured a remark. He was perfectly comfortable as long as Jane did the talking or if she asked him questions. But it was painful to have to start things himself. He liked to watch Chicken Little lift her eyes, her lashes were so long and dark, and the brown eyes seemed to be looking clear into the back of his mind. The notion came to him that he should not like to have anything there he was ashamed of.

But Chicken Little was not thinking about Pat at all. She wanted to quiz him about Carol without seeming to be too much interested in Carol herself. She was studying just how to begin.

"I've forgotten lots of the boys and girls I used to go to school with," she remarked carelessly. "I don't suppose I should know Carol even. Did you know him very well, Pat?"

"Not so well as Sherm, he was different," said Pat rather shortly.

"How different?" This was precisely what she wanted to get at.

"Oh, I don't know as I could explain, exactly. He didn't care to bother with people that didn't

interest him—and I was one who didn't. He's an awfully smart chap."

Chicken Little digested these facts silently while she swung back and forth several times.

"Do you think he's lazy?"

Pat looked up quickly at this direct question. He studied her as if he wondered just what she was driving at.

"Why, that depends—I guess we don't any of us exert ourselves when we don't have to. He never had to—his lessons seemed to come to him without digging. And he is an only child, he never had to lift a finger to do anything at home he didn't want to—I've heard Dr. Gridley say so. Guess it's a good thing he's gone to the Academy. They don't hurt them with any indulgence there, I hear."

"No, they have to walk chalk about every single thing, Ernest says—and then there's the hazing. If a boy gets smart, or lazy, they fairly nag the life out of him."

"Well, I'm a thinking—maybe a little of that sort of thing mightn't hurt Carol any." Pat said this rather hesitatingly as if he were afraid Jane might be offended at any criticism of Carol.

He remembered that Carol had been one of Ernest Morton's chums.

Jane was not offended but she gathered that Pat did not like Carol, and wondered why.



CHAPTER·VIII

THE·NEW·CAROL

"OH, if Ernest were only here!" Chicken Little's tone was so eager it was mournful.

"Yes," said Alice, "the old neighborhood gang would be quite complete then. But I don't believe you would care to play Siege of Acre if he were."

Carol smiled loftily and smoothed out an imaginary crease in his white duck trousers. Alice might think that kind of talk amusing but he didn't care for it himself.

Sherm looked up at Alice with his old-time crooked grin. He made no further response.

Katy had been decorously inspecting the naval insignia on the front of Carol's cap. She glanced up in time to encounter Alice's amused smile. Alice was finding the extreme dignity of the boys diverting. Katy read her thoughts and resented them.

"It may be funny to you, Alice, but that old Acre business has been a chestnut to us for some time."

Carol looked at Katy approvingly.

"Every single person I've met since I came home has reminded me of some fool thing I did when I was a kid. And if they don't do that, they say: 'Why, how you've grown!' Haven't grown an inch in the last two years. They seem to think I went away a year ago in knickerbockers. S'pose they think I wore a Fauntleroy suit and lace collar." Carol fairly growled his disgust.

Alice became abjectly apologetic. "I beg your most humble pardon, Mr. Brown, but you see life hasn't been moving quite so fast with me. I enjoyed that afternoon and like to think of it occasionally."

Mr. Brown was mollified. "Oh, I didn't mind you, Alice, it's everybody's doing it, that gets on my nerves—this old burg's so darned slow anyhow. What do you people find to do with yourselves here?"

They were foregathered in the front parlor of the old Morton house. The red and white Brussels carpet and flowered lace curtains that had been Mrs. Morton's pride, had given place to a bordered rug in shades of dull blue, and to cream-colored madras hangings, undraped, over the old-fashioned window sashes that were still divided into four panes. Alice prided herself on being up-to-date if she was not quite willing to follow all the Oscar Wilde fads in

furnishing that were just beginning to be popular.

Sherm had been inspecting the new old room with considerable interest. He had come in unexpectedly the day before on his way east to college, two days after Carol's arrival. He was already collecting ideas for furnishing his room at college. The Captain had offered him anything on the place from the bearskin rug to his collection of arms, but Sherm did not wish to spoil the completeness of the unique ranch house. Again, he wanted to see what the other boys had. Sherm intended to be in the swim.

He regarded Carol rather impatiently. Sherm did not care for Carol's new airs. "Find to do? Why, school, son, have you forgotten so soon—already? When you get tired of Latin there is always trig or rhetoric or more Latin."

"Don't see why they can't have boating—or some sport. Any ball games this season?"

"Yes, there's a High School nine,—Pat Casey's the captain." Chicken Little spoke up for the first time.

"Pat Casey! Our ould frind Pat," sneered Carol. "And has the High School team come to that?"

Chicken Little looked up quickly and caught Carol's eye. She opened her mouth to protest. Instead she contented herself with looking hard. Her glance, however, did not have that withering effect she intended. Carol returned it indolently. He seemed to have entirely forgotten his letter of invi-

tation to Jane to come on for that Annapolis hop. He had looked her over casually and decided that she was a good-looking kid, but he had not troubled himself to waste any further thought either upon her or Gertie. Chicken Little was furious but she did not mean to show it. She secretly admired him immensely, even when she disapproved of him most—then would be angry with herself.

He was quite the handsomest boy she had ever seen. She and Katy and Katy's Cousin May had decided this solemnly after an extended consultation from which Gertie had been ruled out at the start because she declared that Pat was better-looking than Carol.

"The idea!" said Katy scornfully.

"Why Carol's oodles handsomer! It just gives me the shivers when he looks at me with those beetling eyes of his," exclaimed Cousin May who had been doing much reading of novels during the summer vacation.

"You mean beetling brows," corrected Katy. "It isn't his eyes——" Katy sighed sentimentally, "it's his manners—the way he clicks his heels together when he lifts his cap—and his back—it's straight as a ramrod—and the white uniform——" Katy prolonged the sigh into an ecstatic um-m-m. "I think they're just too sweet for anything!"

Dick snorted when he overheard the girls going into raptures.

"He's so puffed up with conceit he'd burst if you pricked him! Pat's worth ten of him!"

The weather kept warm and the nutting frolic was too far off to wait for. Carol did not seem at all enthusiastic when it was suggested.

"Who wants to go tramping off in hazel thickets? That sort of thing is all right for kids, but I prefer something more amusing myself," he had replied ungraciously.

So Katy had decided on a lawn fête—a gypsy fête in costume with fortune-telling and Chinese lanterns, and a tiny bonfire with a kettle boiling over it in true gypsy style. Katy was not pretending that the lanterns fitted into gypsy life. But they would make the yard look so gay and partified. She had to hurry up her preparations, for Sherm could stay only a week. And they surely must have it while Sherm was there.

The girls found Sherm as satisfactory as Carol was disappointing. He seemed perfectly content to hang around with them and play croquet, while Carol made himself resplendent in a fresh white uniform and sallied forth to call upon some real young ladies. His appearance among them this afternoon was due to Sherm. They were planning for the party.

But something more thrilling than the lawn fête was destined to happen first. Carol was so disdain-

ful about the High School baseball nine, that Dick hatched up a scheme to take Mr. Midshipman Brown down a peg and vindicate Pat's skill. He suggested to Carol that some of the old boys try a game with the school nine. Carol was for it immediately and Sherm thought he could stay a little longer to see it through. They organized a nine the same day and started in to practice. The older boys were bigger and stronger than Pat's team, but on the other hand the school nine were in practice and the others were not. The contest promised to be exciting and Chicken Little and Katy and Gertie were full of it.

The older boys had supposed the affair would be merely a quiet game, but the High School boys showed themselves excitedly determined to beat their predecessors—and to do it with as much *éclat* as possible. They advertised it all over the county. Dick's blood had been up from the start and he helped on the publicity end and also assisted Pat in coaching his team. Dick had been captain of a winning college nine in his day.

The alumni boys began by taking the game rather easily. Carol meant to hold daily practice, but Carol was always easy going unless he had someone to spur him on. This was his vacation and he was not inclined to slave even in the interests of sport. Sherm, however, kept after him and Carol had been a crack player during his last year at school. Dick

began to wonder if he had not been rash in putting the younger boys up against them. But he was betting on Pat. The Irish lad had a trick of accomplishing whatever he set out to do. Dick was pinning his faith to this trait.

Pat himself was by no means so confident. But he meant to play his nine for every ounce of energy and every bit of intelligence they possessed. Carol was a sore spot in his life. Carol never deliberately intended to be cruel to him or to anyone. The lad was too lazy and kindhearted for that. But he had never liked Pat and he had resented Sherm and some of his other friends taking him up. The antagonism had grown till he seldom missed an opportunity to hector Pat, and he was openly contemptuous most of the time. Naturally, Pat was delighted when he went to the Academy, and not overjoyed to hear he was coming home on leave. He had held himself in as best he could while Jane rejoiced over Carol's return. Now, if he could lick him fair and square—if he only could! Pat's blue eyes seemed to turn a steely gray when he thought of it.

Jane and Katy and Gertie were confronted by the tremendous problem of deciding which side they were backing. With the High School and Dick and Pat on one side, and Carol and Sherm on the other, the ethics of the case and their sympathies were painfully mixed. Katy was inclined to stand by the

High School till Carol in an unbending mood took the girls to an ice cream supper at the church as a concession to old acquaintance. He was so entertaining and treated them so generously, that Katy felt it would be positively disloyal to go back on him after that. Further, Carol evidently considered them on his side. He had an agreeable way of including them in his plans which was most flattering.

"We'll lick that little Irishman till he won't dare show his face on a ball-field, won't we girls?" he remarked boastfully.

Chicken Little had been distressed for days over the matter. Every time she decided that she ought to stand by her school and Pat and Dick, she thought how hurt Sherm would be if she did not cheer for his side. If she backed Sherm and Carol, she had visions of Pat's grieved face—not to mention the unmerciful teasing with which Dick would revenge himself for her defection. She just could not decide till Carol made this speech. Then it decided itself.

"No, we won't!" she replied to Carol flatly without any softening comment.

Katy and Gertie looked surprised and Carol turned in her direction with a greater air of interest than he had shown since his return.

"Oh, we won't, won't we? Well, I supposed I could count on Ernest's sister as one of my friends."

Carol was clever in hitting her most vulnerable spot.

But Chicken Little had made her decision for keeps. She faced Carol very indignant and very flushed.

"I don't think I care to be friends with anybody as horrid and rude and conceited as you are. Pat Casey is a gentleman beside you—I hope he'll beat the stuffing out of you!" Chicken Little meant to say this very deliberately. She wanted to be coolly cutting, but her temper got the better of her.

Katy's and Gertie's surprise changed to amazement; Carol wondered for a moment if he had heard aright. When he was convinced that he had, and a single glance at Jane's excited defiant face removed his doubts, his temper took fire also.

"Thank you, Miss Morton, for your kind wishes—so elegantly expressed, too. It's all right with me if you prefer Mr. Casey's society to mine." Carol was deliberate—and cutting. "Ernest will be so pleased to hear of your new friend."

They were standing beside the Halford gate. Carol had come by on his way from practice on the ball-field just as Jane was coming out the gate, homeward bound.

Jane could not think of anything to retort. She hardly ever could on the spur of the moment, but in the night or the next day, perhaps, all manner of sharp and witty things would come into her head.

It was maddening not to have them on her tongue's end when she wanted them. Katy usually did, to Jane's despair and envy. She did so want to say something crushing to Carol now before she took her departure. Since she could not, she did the next best thing and walked away in dignified silence.

Had she but known it, she made much more of an impression upon careless Carol than she could have with words. He watched her all the way to her gate. She was walking rapidly with a fierce little swing to express her utter displeasure.

"I didn't know Jane was such a spitfire," he remarked to Katy and Gertie after she disappeared.

"She isn't usually," protested Gertie quick to defend her friend.

"Then what in Sam Hill made her flare—I didn't say anything!"

"You were hateful about Pat—and you kind of act as if nobody 'round here was—was——" Gentle Gertie was floundering. She had merely started out to explain, but her explanation sounded almost as uncomplimentary as Chicken Little's outburst.

"Was what?" demanded Carol gruffly. "Fire away—I can stand it!"

Gertie finished bravely, "—was good enough for you. We were all so tickled to have you come—and—then you didn't seem to want have anything to do with us—'cause we weren't stylish—and

grown up. And I guess Jane felt it the worst, because you'd written to her and asked her to that hop."

"Hop? Gee whiz, I did—I remember! Ernest said maybe she'd come on to visit with Mrs. Morton. She looked so much more grown-up in her photograph—I was thinking she was about sixteen." Carol whistled.

Katy found this exceedingly interesting.

"Anyhow, you asked her—and you've clean forgotten it!" Katy persisted.

Carol was betrayed into a self-conscious flush. The girls had succeeded in making him feel foolish. He did not care to discuss the subject any further.

"Oh, come now, I didn't forget on purpose and I like you girls first-rate—don't hector a fellow when he's down. Let's shake hands and be friends. And I'm going to be awfully disappointed if you don't yell for our side. You wouldn't go back on Sherm, would you, even if I am a bad lot?"

This last was rank wheedling. Carol had taken off his cap—which he had not bothered to do for the girls when he first came up—and stood smiling down at them with a hand outstretched to each.

Katy and Gertie promptly shook hands, but they both omitted to say which side they should cheer for.

They watched him swing down the street in silence for several seconds. Then Katy remarked deci-

sively: "You can do as you please, Gertie, but I shall stick to the High School."

"I was going to, anyway," returned Gertie tersely. Katy was still reflecting.

"Carol's the kind that likes you better if you snub him." Katy studied over this discovery for some time, then imparted it to Chicken Little, when she gave her an account of what happened after she left.

"He never noticed us as long as we were nice to him. He likes to be liked, though he pretends he doesn't care. It made him mad when you sassed him, but it's the kind of mad that doesn't want to let you alone. Do you know, I believe there are a lot of boys like that?" Katy concluded sagely.

"You mean that like you better if you're mean?" Katy nodded.

"I don't believe Sherm would—or Pat." Chicken Little was considering the desirableness of this new rule of conduct.

"No," said Katy, "they wouldn't. But you see there's lots of kinds of boys. It's the conceited kind—and—and the flirty ones I mean. You've got to sit on them real good and hard before they—they—respect you."

"I guess Carol's both," conceded Chicken Little reluctantly, loath to own that the handsome lad had clay feet.

Katy had not spared her the humiliating fact that

Carol had forgotten all about asking her to a hop. And she had boasted about that hop for three months. Never mind, she could go to one with Ernest. She wasn't dependent on Carol Brown, thank you. Her ruffled vanity was quite ready to give Carol all the snubbing the law allowed.

She did not see him again until the afternoon of the game. Dick had taken great pains to have the High School sympathizers line up with flags and banners to make a good showing to encourage the younger nine. The bleachers were full. It was a golden September day when everyone was glad of an excuse to be out of doors. Then the whole town was interested either in the High School boys or the alumni nine. Mothers left off putting up pears and making grape jelly, and lawyers, doctors, and merchants decided that everybody would be at the ball-game anyway, and they might as well lay off for a few hours and see the fun.

Buggies and farm wagons and the crowds that could not find room on the grand stand were lined up inside the high board fences. The fence tops were decorated with an unending supply of small boys. If one got tired and climbed down, there always seemed to be two others ready to fight for the vacant place.

Carol looked about over the sea of heads in amazement. He had not expected little old Center-

ville would make so much of a game between the old boys and the youngsters. He began to wish his nine had taken a little more time to get in training. Still, it wasn't possible that Pat and his bunch of kids could beat them. He would hate it like sixty though, if they did. Why, it would be a reflection on the United States Navy! And if his mates back at the Academy found out that he had let a younger nine clean him out—if they did—wouldn't they make things unpleasant for him when he got back?

Pat Casey surveyed the throngs with equal dismay. He had done his level best—he meant to do his best that afternoon. But he stood in wholesome awe of the prodigies the older boys might be expected to achieve. And he was afraid the crowds might make some of his line-up have stage fright. They had never played before such crowds before. He warned the boys.

"Don't give a darn what the people think or say or whether they cheer us or the other chaps—just keep your eyes glued to the game, and you won't get rattled. See!"

The nine vowed they saw, and the substitutes watched them take their places enviously. This was a game that would go down in history. They would give their eyes to be in it.

The alumni took their places on the diamond amid tremendous cheering. The applause was a trifle

fainter for the school nine when their first man came to the bat.

Sherm held the responsible position of catcher. Carol had made his fame in his senior year at High School as pitcher. But he had gone in for seaman-ship during his year at the Academy and had had no time for baseball. And while Sherm loyally assured him he hadn't lost his knack, Carol found he was not so sure of himself as he had been a year before.

Sherm himself had speed and was a pretty safe batter, and there were one or two other good men among the alumni, but their great weakness was likely to be lack of practice and teamwork.

Sherm went to the plate amid shouts of encouragement in which Chicken Little could not refrain from joining. After all it was only true sportmanship to cheer for the other side—especially Sherm.

The school pitcher, though not a brilliant one, proved fairly steady and sent two smooth strikes over the plate. Sherm hit the second one and sent it sailing into the outfield while he ran to first base. The fielder fumbled and Sherm slid to second.

The alumni cheered vociferously.

Pat on second base brought his teeth together with a stubborn click, and there was a glint in his blue eyes that meant business. The next fellow wouldn't get by him if the ball was within his reach.

Carol, on the other hand, relaxed unconsciously.

The afternoon was hot and if this was a sample of Pat's team, their side would have a walkover.

A smile of grim satisfaction passed over Pat's face as his pitcher's third ball fanned the alumni captain. He would rather get at Carol than any man on the team. His pitcher was playing cleverly and things began to look brighter for the school.

It was the school crowd's turn to yell and they roared lustily. They could not quite keep down a little derision for the enemy captain.

Carol was furious at the way he had started out. His fingers fairly itched to get the ball. Wait till he had a chance to pitch. He'd show them!

The school pitcher was firmly resolved to be cool and calm, but this triumph excited him and after three balls and two strikes, he pitched an easy one. Sherm made third on his team-mate's sacrifice.

The spectators settled down to solid enjoyment. With two out and a runner on third as a starter, it promised to be a good game.

A smashing grounder by an alumnus kept the High School supporters tense till a lightning play by Captain Pat Casey beat Sherm to home base by a hair-raising fraction. The school burst into a thunder of cheers. This ended the first half and the alumni had not scored.

Carol, still tingling with shame and disappointment, started out the second half brilliantly. He sent

his balls over the plate like greased lightning to the despair of Pat's first batter, who found himself facing a third bewildering curve before he fairly drew breath. He struck desperately, but it was a foul and Sherm caught it, for the first out.

Pat gritted his teeth once more. He saw it was to be a fight, but he had faith in his team. His next batter went to the plate with a determination to do or die after a quick word of encouragement from his captain.

As the game progressed, it became apparent that if Carol was a more brilliant pitcher than his rival, he was also more erratic. The excitement of the crowd increased with every inning. It was one thrill after another. The teams were more evenly matched than anyone had dreamed. Again and again, the score was tied, first one nine leading, and then the other. The players were tense and alert every minute, always on guard. A sudden turn of luck or a quick series of plays brought the crowd to its feet time and time again. Everybody was keyed up to concert pitch.

Chicken Little screamed herself hoarse—even quiet Gertie yelled with the rest.

Dick led the school yells and his "Who-takes-the cake?—Pat-takes-the cake!!! Hip-hip-hurrah!—rah!-rah!!!rah!!!" shouted by several hundred lusty young throats, with twice the number of

stamping young feet to accent it, was enough to make any boy tingle. Pat had never before received such an ovation. Indeed, no baseball player ever had previously in all the history of quiet Centerville.

Pat could not resist stealing a shy glance at Chicken Little, when he heard the thunderous applause. He wanted very much to stand well with her. He would not have been human, if he had not resented Carol's snobbishness. He was determined to beat Carol. But deeper even than this desire, was his longing to have Jane see that he could hold his own with these boys who had had all the advantages given to them that he must fight for alone.

Sherm was quick to appreciate the fight Pat was making. He had never seen the Irish boy's face so set. Sometimes he fairly went white when his men lost. Sherm almost hoped he would win. He thought it would not be bad medicine for Carol or some of the others, who had been especially boastful about cleaning out the kids. As for himself, he did not care a hang, though he was doing his watchful best. He knew his own team had more star players, but Pat was playing his team for everything there was in them.

By the last of the ninth the score stood four to five in favor of the alumni. The High School was straining every nerve to make the one run necessary to tie the score again. Pat, with face pale and jaw

set, concentrated every bit of energy and brain power he possessed on winning that one run. Dick was everywhere, shouting cheerily to spur on the team. The field was a veritable pandemonium of whistles and cat-calls—mixed with shrieks of encouragement.

It seemed as if the whole school were bawling out: "Just one more run, boys. Sock it to them, Pat! Just once more!" Then in the instant's lull while they were gathering breath for the next shout, Chicken Little's voice rang out shrilly: "One more will tie us, Pat! Oh, Pat!!!"

She did not know whether Pat heard or not. He stood there with upraised bat, poised, expectant, with his eyes glued on Carol. He might have been in a desert for all the attention he seemed to be paying to the crowd.

But Chicken Little's voice had hardly died away when with a vicious but carefully aimed swing of his bat, Pat sent the ball like a shot from a bow string, swift and low. Carol in the pitcher's box made a desperate leap for it, but the impact sent him sprawling and the ball bounded on, while a slim gray streak flashed along the line from third base to home. And the runner, known in school vernacular, as Skinny Palmer, slid home a good minute before the fielder shot the ball to frantic Sherm.

As quick with his head as Skinny was with his feet, Sherm sent the ball to second and put Pat,

bound for third, out. But the score was tied and they would have to play another inning.

Field and bleachers alike went mad. Pat and Skinny; the heroes of the hour, hugged and pounded each other fairly speechless with joy. Dick howled and stamped till he was hoarse. One usually dignified senior created a small sensation by flinging both arms around his favorite teacher and giving her a resounding smack. For fully five minutes, the High School side degenerated into a howling, shouting, screeching mob. Chicken Little and Katy shouted and laughed till the tears were running down their cheeks. Even quiet Gertie stood up on her seat and whooped, to her mother's utter amazement.

"Why, I wouldn't have missed this for a farm!" exclaimed Alice as soon as she could make herself heard. "I didn't know old Centerville was capable of such enthusiasm."

After the wild joy subsided they settled down once more to watch the fateful tenth inning which was to decide.

"I just don't care!" said Chicken Little. "Even if the others do win, they can't ever laugh at Pat again!"

"No, indeed," agreed Alice, "Pat has certainly won his spurs today."

It was Carol's turn now to set his jaw. This last

turn of luck had pretty well knocked the conceit out of him. He saw only too clearly how his nine's lack of teamwork had told against them. But he had his dander up. The alumni still had a chance, if the boys did not lose their nerve. It was evident Sherm hadn't. He smiled his crooked smile and remarked dryly: "Looks as if we'd have to hump ourselves if we don't want Mr. Patrick Casey to lay us out."

Carol snarled a reply. He gathered his team together and gave them an encouraging talk that sounded almost like a roast. They were already ashamed and a little dazed.

The first half of the tenth was a trifle tame. Both nines were nervously alert. Though the alumni had chances for a run they were unable to score. The High School came to bat jubilantly determined to win.

But Carol was on his mettle. The one hope for the alumni was to keep their opponents from scoring and force another inning. He fought inch by inch, fanning the first man easily. Then the second. Pat began to look uneasy. Sherm grinned approvingly at Carol. Chicken Little and Gertie held each other's hands and leaned way forward in their seats. The only consolation Chicken Little could get out of an alumni triumph, was in thinking of Sherm. She felt a little guilty about going back on Sherm.

However, Pat had no intention of being vanquished by Carol's skill. He had a trick up his

sleeve that he meant to try in an emergency. Dick had told him several instances where a bit of head-work had saved the day. He astonished the field by taking out the batter, who had managed to hit one of Carol's curves—but who could not run—and putting Skinny Palmer in his place. Skinny stole second on a passed ball. Then a swift "two-bagger" on one of Carol's wild throws brought Skinny home.

Carol was furious—to no purpose. Pat was within his rights and Skinny went flying home in spite of the alumni's utmost endeavors. Their school's superior teamwork had won.

Chicken Little was too wrought up even to yell when Skinny's foot touched the home base. She sat like a little wooden image with both fists tightly clenched. The schoolboys hoisted Pat and Skinny on their shoulders to carry them off the field in triumph. On their way they passed near the girls who were with Mrs. Halford and Alice. The others clapped and cheered vigorously. But Jane snatched off her crimson sash and waved it like a victorious banner. Pat saw, and tore off his baseball cap with a bow that Carol might have envied.

Everybody around stared and Jane shrank back abashed. But her impulsive little act made Pat's victory complete. He didn't find time until he went to bed that night to regret that his mother and Maggie could not have been there to rejoice.



CHAPTER IX THE GIPSY FETE

CAROL was disgusted. His vanity had suffered more and harder knocks the past twenty-four hours than during any previous six months of his existence. It took him a little while to pull himself together. Sherm stood by him like a man.

"Don't take it so hard, old chap, we didn't play a bad game. But Pat has been drilling those boys for a year, in season and out of season. He's one of the kind that never lets up—then Dick put him up to some of his old college turns. Why, we didn't make a start at licking ourselves into shape."

"All that may whitewash me here, Sherm, but it won't go down with the boys at the Academy—I'll never hear the last of this. It will label me for the rest of my course."

"Nonsense, it depends entirely on how the direful tale gets back to them. You just sit down this P.M. and write Ernest and any of the other chaps you are

thick with and make a jolly good story of it at your own expense. That'll squelch anybody else's attempts to make fun of you. Don't be so thin-skinned—they'll be after you sure, if you let them see you care."

After Carol had mourned around for twenty-four hours or so, he decided that Sherm's advice was good. He settled down to the hard labor of writing three funny letters when he did not feel funny in the least. Sherm intruded into the midst of the first and sat on a trunk and assisted.

"Say," said Sherm, starting up as he heard the town clock striking four, "I promised to meet the girls at the schoolhouse at four. Come along over with me. Katy and Chicken Little are first-rate at anything like this. We'll make rough drafts, and you can write them over after supper. You can't get them off on today's mail anyhow."

Carol considered and decided he would. The girls in their turn were flattered at this attention, and a truce was declared.

The afternoon of the gypsy fête was almost as much fun as the evening. They were not to wear masks. Mr. Halford did not believe in masks for such young people. They could have just as much fun in the fancy costumes without them. And boys of that age were apt to be up to enough deviltry without having masks to encourage them.

The three girls got excused from school after their two o'clock recitations. They found the boys and Alice already at work helping Mrs. Halford.

"I do wish we could do something with the gooseberry bushes," said Alice. "They are so enormous; there are regular caverns underneath them. How old are they, Mrs. Halford?"

"Why, I don't know—let me see. Gertie was born in this house and they were here when we bought the place the year before. I suppose they must have been six or seven years old then."

"Why, couldn't we put the fortune-teller there?" suggested Sherm. "We could make a little booth at the farther end of the row and light it with one lone lantern. It would be beautifully mysterious and impressive."

"Oh, and we could put a strip of old carpet down and make them get down on their hands and knees at the opening at this other end. Wouldn't it be fun?"

"We'd have to put a lantern and a sign here at the entrance to the gooseberry row or they'd never find it," said Alice. "But I think it would be great."

"I'll make you a sign with a death's head and cross bones and——"

"Make a picture of a witch, Sherm, a regular hag bent over a caldron," interrupted Katy.

"We were planning to have the fortune-teller dressed like a witch," said her mother. "We might put a tiny kettle in the booth. It wouldn't be safe to have a real fire but we could put a candle underneath. And the witch could be stirring some awful looking mixture."

"There are some old black calico curtains they used at the church for the Christmas entertainment over in the storeroom, Jane," said Alice. "You and Carol might run over and get them while Sherm plans how we can build the booth."

They hurried off, Chicken Little walking so fast that Carol had to unlimber his long legs to keep up. He did hate to exert himself when it was not necessary.

"Here, what's the rush, young lady?"

The "young lady" revived an unpleasant subject. Chicken Little tossed her head.

"Humph, I didn't know you considered me a young lady."

Carol looked up quickly. He had been meaning to say something about the hop to soothe her wounded feelings, but always forgot when he was alone with her.

"I don't now," he retorted coolly.

It was Jane's turn to look up. But she was not going to gratify Mr. High and Mighty by asking

any questions. She reached over the fence and picked a flower from a gladiolus stalk with her very best air of indifference.

Carol continued suavely: "You're something much sweeter, Chicken Little,—” Carol waited a moment for her to grow properly curious, "you're a bud. Some day you will bloom out, but—now——” Jane was all ears with curiosity, "now, you are a trifle—green.”

If Carol had intended to be soothing he made a mistake. Chicken Little's eyes flashed, and Chicken Little's slender brown hand also flashed and gave him a most resounding smack on the cheek. It was no love tap. She had stood quite enough from Carol.

It was entirely unexpected and the lad was hot-tempered.

"You, spitfire—you will, will you?" He had her hands pinioned in two seconds. "I've a mind to box your ears, just to see how you like the sensation." Chicken Little glared up at him defiantly. She further conveyed her contempt by sticking out her tongue.

This last did not have the effect she designed. The impertinent pink tongue wagging below her indignant big brown eyes was irresistibly funny. Carol's wrath changed speedily to mirth. He dropped her hands and laughed and laughed while

Jane waxed madder and redder at every chuckle. He was not oblivious to her healthy color.

"Chicken Little, you are game all right. Say, I'm sorry about that hop business. If you come next spring—I'll do my best to make you have a good time, honestly I will!"

Chicken Little's tongue was loosed for conversational purposes. She assured him she would not go with him to a hop or any place else on this green earth—not to the longest day she lived. She never had known such a horrid, conceited boy—further, she wasn't going to speak to him another single time—not she. She was eloquent, but Carol did not seem at all overcome. When she had quite finished, he seized her by the arm and gently propelled her up the front steps in spite of her efforts to get away.

"Here, they'll be waiting for us—you'll have to dig out those curtains whether you speak to me or not. And, Chicken Little," coaxingly, "you are a lot prettier when you are mad."

Jane got the curtains and loaded them on Carol's shoulder in stony silence. Carol chattered volubly. She pretended not to listen till he was clever enough to turn the conversation to Ernest. He began to relate some of Ernest's narrow escapes from being caught while visiting in the other boys' rooms at night. She almost forgot herself and asked a question. But she managed to preserve her dignity until

they passed the division alley between Alice and Dick's and the Halford yard. Suddenly Carol interrupted his story with a sharp exclamation.

Perched upon an old keg which enabled her to look over the high board fence, stood a strange girl in gypsy costume. Jane forgot her vow of silence.

"Why, she looks like a real gypsy!"

"I believe she is," replied Carol, "though it may be some of the kids painted up to fool us. Here, come behind that tree and let's watch her a minute."

The girl continued to gaze over the fence with absorbed interest. Her brown skin and rather dirty dress did not look as if she were any of the young folk masquerading. She seemed to be about eighteen or twenty and was handsome in true gypsy style with very black eyes and hair.

"I'm sure I have never seen her before," said Jane after a long inspection.

"Nor I," said Carol. "She looks to me like the real goods. There must be a gypsy camp near by. Possibly she may have heard of the party and have come on purpose to see, or she may just have been passing and been attracted by the talking and laughing."

They watched her for several minutes but she did not turn around sufficiently for them to see her full face and she was apparently merely curious about what was going on in the yard.

"Well, she doesn't seem to be up to any deviltry, whoever she is," remarked Carol presently. "I guess we'd better take these curtains over. We can slip up behind the cherry trees in the back yard and have a closer look at her."

But Katy had already discovered the watcher before they arrived. She had called the attention of the others to her, and the gypsy had climbed down and disappeared, before they could reach the alley fence.

"Dear me, I wonder if it was a real gypsy," said Mrs. Halford. "They are regular sneak thieves most of them—I never like to have them about. But we often have a band camping north of town in the autumn."

"She certainly looked like the genuine article," said Sherm.

Katy had an idea. "Oh, Mother, if she is a gypsy, wouldn't it be fun to get her to come and tell fortunes?"

The others were instantly enthusiastic, except Alice.

"She might steal things—and it would probably bring some of the rest of the band hanging round. Of course, it would be loads of fun to have a real live gypsy."

"I'll run after her if you say so," offered Sherm.

"No, thank you, Sherm," said Mrs. Halford after

a moment's deliberation, "I think it would be rather risky with our company silver all out and everything."

They soon forgot all about the uninvited visitor in the bustle and excitement of the fortune-teller's booth, and the cosy corners they were making out of the wash bench and an old settee.

"It is charming," Alice remarked complacently as the clock struck six. "If the young folk don't have a good time they are an ungrateful lot!"

Alice departed homeward for supper carrying Jane with her, and Sherm and Carol went down-down on a belated errand for Mrs. Halford.

As they were going into a store, they came face to face with the gypsy girl coming out. She evidently recognized Sherm as one of the persons she had seen in the yard. She hesitated a moment, passed on, then turned and came back.

"You want someone tell fortunes?" she demanded. "I tell 'em—real true ones—my grandmother show me."

The boys looked at each other. The girl had an open face and a pretty way as she looked at them coaxingly. "I not charge much—one dollar maybe."

"One dollar for each or for the evening?" asked Carol.

"The whole evening." The gypsy smiled, showing even white teeth.

"Gee—I wish we could have her. Wouldn't it be a lark?"

Sherm looked dubious. "It would be fun—but it isn't our affair, come along—I want some dinner, I'm hungry as a bear."

The gypsy laid a detaining hand on Carol's arm. "I tell the young gentleman's fortune for a quarter," she entreated.

Carol wavered.

"Oh, come on," protested Sherm, "there isn't time."

"Tomorrow, maybe," said Carol to the gypsy, "where's your camp?"

The girl smiled and nodded. "Yes, yes, tomorrow. Our camp over there in the woods—by the creek." She pointed to the timber north of the town.

"By Wilson's Run?" asked Carol.

She shook her head doubtfully. "I watch for you," she said. "You come early in the morning."

"I see you coming early in the morning—you'll be in the land of nod till somebody wakes you in time for a nine o'clock breakfast," laughed Sherm as they walked on.

Mrs. Halford had kept it a profound secret as to who was to tell the fortunes. She thought the young people would enjoy them more if there were something mysterious about it. She had secured one of

the young teachers who had just come to town and was not well known. Miss Arnold had told fortunes for fun at a little tea-party she had attended recently.

Mr. Halford let her in through the side gate that evening while Katy and Gertie were still busy dressing, and showed her the entrance at the rear of the fortune-teller's booth, which was near the alley fence. You could easily slip in here unobserved beneath the shadow of a big cherry tree. Miss Arnold ensconced herself comfortably where she could watch the guests gather without being seen herself. There was no need for her to go into the little tent until the party were all assembled.

When Katy and Gertie sallied forth into the yard where the lanterns were already twinkling like big fire flies among the dusky foliage, they were all agog to know whether the fortune-teller was there.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Halford. "She won't appear until the fateful moment."

Chicken Little and Alice and Dick arrived on the dot, and there was much admiring of costumes. Alice was a gypsy queen with all her beautiful dark hair floating down her back. Jane had a yellow brown cambric skirt, a white waist, open at the throat to display many gay colored beads, a red velvet bolero trimmed with yellow cord and tiny tassels, and the Roman sash the Captain had given her, knotted about her waist. A tiny red velvet cap



There was much admiring of costumes

completed a costume, coquettish if not entirely gypsyish. Katy looked like a dancing bright will-o'-the-wisp in a flame-colored and yellow dress with a black bodice. Gertie was a little leaf brown maid except for a red handkerchief knotted about her head, and strings and strings of blue and green and yellow beads.

Sherm said she had fallen off the oak tree by the gate.

The boys were got up regardless of effort or precedent. They were certainly much cleaner and gayer than any gypsy men who had ever visited Centerville. The effect was produced largely with picturesque trousers and bright-colored shirts and handkerchiefs. Dick said they could fill an order for brand new pirates nicely. Each one was armed with a dagger or pistol which they flourished on the slightest provocation. These war-like feints made the girls squeal and added to the merriment.

The fortune-telling booth became instantly popular. There was always a crowd in front of the swinging lantern and the sign of the witch and cross bones. These symbols seemed to make the fortunes more impressively real. One girl said it just gave her the shivers to go past that sign, and then to have to crouch down and creep along the dusky gooseberry aisle to the tiny tent. Most of the young people were in a frame of mind to believe any-

thing they were told, by the time they reached Miss Arnold.

She was clever and predicted blissful or hair-raising futures, according to whether the young people seemed bold or timid. It was about ten-thirty when she was surprised to hear a tap at the hidden entrance at the back of the tent. A pretty girl in a foreign-looking dress stood there smiling.

"I tell fortunes now—you go, Miss Halford say."

Miss Arnold was surprised, but supposed Mrs. Halford wanted to relieve her and give her an opportunity to mingle with the others. She hastily dismissed the boy who was seeking to unveil his future at that moment, then ushered the girl into the tent and, slipping out through the rear entrance, joined the young people on the lawn. Mr. and Mrs. Halford were both busy in the house at the time preparing to serve the refreshments, so no one noticed the change.

The next candidate was a boy and he came out from the tent greatly impressed with the fortune-teller's powers.

"Say, she's a real gypsy all right. Wonder where Mrs. Halford got her."

Two others also reported amazing fortunes. Then something happened. One of the girls, Belle Pratt, was motherless and managed her dressing very much to suit herself. Tonight, she had rummaged her

mother's jewel box and had adorned herself with a gold necklace with a handsome pearl pendant, and a beautiful and costly diamond ring.

The new fortune-teller instantly noticed the ring and asked very prettily to see it in her hand. After admiring it for a moment, she suddenly rose, snatched the necklace from the girl's throat, and vanished out the back of the tent.

For an instant Belle was dazed with surprise, then she gave a scream that brought everyone in the vicinity running to the spot. Sherm and Jane happened to be near by and they arrived on the scene just in time to see a gayly-dressed girl climb the fence and disappear into the dim alley.

"Why, it's the gypsy girl—what can she have done?"

They hurried to the rear of the tent but Belle had rushed down to the entrance where she came in. So it was some minutes before they found out exactly what had happened and how it happened.

Poor Miss Arnold was overwhelmed with remorse when she discovered how she had been deceived. One of the boys was sent at once to notify the sheriff and the local constable. The lawn fête was spoiled. Many of the girls were afraid to stay outdoors any longer, so they all adjourned to the house for the ice cream and cake and lemonade.

Jane noticed Carol and Sherm whispering to-

gether, then saw them slip away through the back yard. She ran after them and was just in time to see them leap over the alley fence.

"They're going after her," she decided. She hesitated a moment, then slipped to the alley gate, and peered out. She could see the boys slinking along the alley fence. Without stopping to think of the distress her absence might occasion, she stole after them. The boys left the alley after carefully surveying the street, and turned to the north.

"They are—sure as you're born—I'm going, too!"

And that was the beginning of the most exciting night Chicken Little had ever known, or Sherm or Carol either for that matter.



CHAPTER X THREE · YOUNG · DETECTIVES

THE moon shone down through the maple trees that bordered the sidewalks on Front Street making lacy arabesques of light and shade on the board walks. The street between was almost as light as day. Chicken Little peered cautiously out from the shadowy alley to see which way the boys had gone. Also, incidentally, to make sure there was no one else she knew in sight. Sherm and Carol were a few rods ahead stealing along under the shadow of the trees.

It was no part of Jane's plan to join them immediately. They would escort her promptly back to the party. But if she could keep them in sight without their discovering her, until they were some distance from home, they would probably take her along in preference to giving up the chase to go back with her.

She also stole into the shadow of the trees, keeping on the turf along the walks so her footsteps could

not be heard. There was no one else to be seen. The boys were walking rapidly as if sure of their way. Most of the houses along the street were dark. The night seemed singularly soundless except for a faint rustling of leaves when the breeze stirred them. Jane was a little frightened—the familiar street was changed into a fairy world with pools of silvery brightness all about her. She had the feeling that some time in the far distant past she had done just this before.

Presently, she noticed that the distance between herself and the boys was widening in spite of her utmost efforts. What if they should get away and leave her all alone? Possibly some of the other gypsies would come to meet the girl. They might carry her off. She had heard of just such happenings, though mostly in stories. When the boys turned a corner ahead and were momentarily lost to view she was terrified and broke into a run. She fairly tore around that corner and was promptly halted by a strong pair of masculine hands. Chicken Little started to scream but was instantly stifled by another strong hand clapped over her mouth.

She fought and struggled in vain a moment, then her captors suddenly loosed her with an exclamation of disgust.

“Gosh, it’s only Chicken Little!” Sherm’s tone was not flattering.

"Chicken Little? What in thunder are you doing here?"

Carol looked as if he could cheerfully annihilate her where she stood.

"I thought it was queer if that gypsy could have slipped in behind us anywhere—that was certainly her on ahead a moment ago—and I'll swear she turned this corner." Sherm was peering among the trees along the side street.

The boys had heard Jane running behind them and believed Fate had delivered the gypsy into their hands. Her bright costume which they failed to recognize in the deep shadow had made them all the surer.

"Keep perfectly still a few moments," warned Carol. "She may have heard us and slipped into somebody's yard."

He scanned the neighboring grounds carefully. They could detect no moving thing. There was not so much as a dog in sight though they heard one barking in a house near by.

"The thing for us to do is to keep right on in the shadow, and if we don't strike her trail again, hide at the edge of the wood and try to intercept her. If she stops to hide in a yard she can't wait very long," whispered Carol.

"But what about Jane?" asked Sherm.

"Oh, darn!" Carol exclaimed incautiously.

That they had any responsibility for Chicken Little's welfare, had not before occurred to him. He had been too absorbed in their chase of the gypsy.

Jane was eagerly apologetic. "Oh, let me come, too, boys, pretty please! I can keep up—and I won't make a mite of noise. I've followed you clear from Halford's—and you didn't know I was there—now did you?"

Jane put her hand on Sherm's arm beseechingly.

Sherm looked down at her, half annoyed, half yielding.

"I suppose one of us would have to take her back, if we don't," said Carol irritably. "What in the dickens did you want to come tagging along for any-way? This isn't any girl's business."

"I kind of thought it was," was Jane's unexpected retort.

Sherm chuckled and Carol's lips relaxed into a reluctant grin.

The boys were crazy to push on though neither particularly wanted to try it alone. Still, they could not very well send Jane back unattended at that time of night—especially with a gypsy band around.

"Oh, well, come along," said Carol after a moment's hesitation.

Sherm held out a few seconds longer.

"Do you think it's safe? We might get into some kind of mix-up."

Carol slipped his hand into his hip pocket, pulling something partly into view—it was a small pistol.

“Guess I’m equal to protecting one small girl,” he asserted boastfully.

“Don’t know whether I could do much with a pistol or not,” said Sherm, “a shotgun’s more in my line. But you’d better keep that trinket out of sight unless we need it pretty bad or we will get into trouble sure.”

“Well, we mustn’t fool any longer. We’ll keep Jane between us. Mum’s the word, young lady,—step as lightly as you can—and keep in the shadow.”

Carol was promptly taking command of the expedition.

Chicken Little was charmed to go, on any terms.

They stole along uneasily for another block when suddenly a short distance ahead they saw the gypsy girl steal out of a yard into the shadow of the trees. They guessed she was making her way from tree trunk to tree trunk, for they caught only occasional glimpses of her as she crossed a patch of moonlight.

Carol made the others freeze in their tracks until he was sure she had not seen them. They had been moving in a specially dense bit of shade when she left the yard and scanned the empty street.

The chase began in earnest now with the odds decidedly in favor of the gypsy’s reaching the woods before they could overtake her. There was the chance too, that she might join some of the men of

her tribe, who were undoubtedly her accomplices, and must surely be watching for her.

"What'll you do, if we do catch her?" demanded Chicken Little excitedly.

The boys were a little doubtful on this point themselves. But this was no time for discussion. Sound carries far at night. Carol brought his hand down heavily on Jane's shoulder.

"Hush!" he whispered sternly.

And Jane had scant breath for asking questions during the next few minutes for Carol set a pace little short of a run. They were gaining on the gypsy. When she crossed the next street in the moonlight they saw she was limping a little.

They were following Indian file and Carol was careful to take them over the next cross street in an exact line with the row of trees, in order not to expose them to her view if she looked back. As nearly as they could ascertain she was not wasting any time looking back now. She was hurrying for all she was worth. Despite their utmost efforts they could not lessen her lead in the course of the next block. She was in danger of slipping out of sight.

Carol was impatient.

"Here, Sherm, you stick with Jane while I run on."

He did not wait for remonstrances, but shot ahead, disappearing and reappearing, but gaining

rapidly on the gypsy. The others followed as swiftly as possible. They had been too absorbed in the chase to notice what was happening behind them until they heard the pounding of horses' feet. Coming down the street on the gallop were three horsemen.

"I bet it's the marshal and his posse. Mr. Halford's got him," exclaimed Sherm. "Gee, Chicken Little, I wish you hadn't come!"

It had suddenly dawned on Sherm that the marshal would certainly see them when he came abreast, and would as certainly wonder what on earth they were doing out toward the edge of town that time of night.

Three minutes later he was given full opportunity to explain for the posse spotted them promptly, exultantly sure that Chicken Little was the gypsy. They might both have been trotted off to jail, if one of the men had not recognized Sherm.

When Sherm and Jane had finally made it clear that they had followed the gypsy from the party in order not to lose her trail and had declared eagerly that the thief was only a little way ahead with Carol hot on her tracks, the men spurred on, calling back to Sherm that he'd better take the girl home—this was no job for women folk.

Chicken Little declined flatly to be taken home. She was all aquiver with the excitement of the adven-

ture and didn't mean to lose its finish if she could help it.

"What'll they ever do with her, Sherm? Will they put that poor girl in jail all by herself?"

"Don't worry, Chicken Little, the marshal's wife will look after her—besides, she's evidently a bad lot. Cricky, I wonder if they've got her. They're stopping there by that bit of hedge."

The men had not got her. Further, they saw no trace either of the gypsy or Carol, though they scoured the neighborhood for three blocks. And the gypsy certainly could not have gone farther than that, if it were the gypsy, the young people had seen.

One of the men came galloping back to question them again.

"You are sure? And you say young Brown was less than a half block behind her? And there isn't a dod-gasted vestige of either of them to be seen! Well, I'll be jiggered! One thing's certain—they can't be far away."

He galloped off.

They could see that two of the men had dismounted and were beating along the hedge through a tall patch of sunflowers. Presently, a shot rang out. Jane clutched Sherm's arm in terror.

He patted her hand reassuringly.

"Don't worry—they probably just shot into the air to scare her out if she's hiding in that sun-flower

patch. But, Chicken Little, this is surely no place for you, and I'm going to trot you home just as fast as you can walk."

Sherm seized her resolutely by the arm and turned her homeward.

They had not taken ten steps when a voice inside the picket fence a few paces from them whispered: "Sherm—wait a minute—I need you."

It was Carol crouched close to the white pickets.

"She got scared when she heard the horses and doubled back through the yards. She's in that summer house over there now. Run, tell the men while I watch the entrance. Chicken Little, you run round the corner and watch to see she doesn't sneak past me and get out that side gate. She's sure a slippery customer!"

Jane sped obediently round the corner trembling with excitement, and something astonishingly like fear, though she tried to persuade herself she wasn't in the least afraid. And she was delighted to have such an opportunity of proving her courage to Carol.

The summer house stood close to the fence on that side. It was smothered in creepers and the thick green leafage and white blossoms of madeira vines. The fragrance from the tiny white cluster was heavy all about. Chicken Little crouched down and peered through the pickets near the side gate. She could

not help feeling sorry for the gypsy girl hunted in this way. She wondered if she could ever find voice to cry out, if she should actually see her coming out of the summer house.

Three minutes went by that seemed like hours. She heard so many eery noises, crickets chirping, the wind rustling through a big evergreen tree in an adjoining yard, somebody's shutter creaking down the street. Carol was nowhere to be seen. She almost thought she must have dreamed him. A pungent odor mingled with the cloying fragrance of the madeira blossoms. She was kneeling in the midst of a bed of dog fennel.

Suddenly she thought she heard something stirring in the summer house. She raised up a little to see better. The next moment somebody parted the vines at the back of the summer house, emerged cautiously, then darted toward the gate beside her. She opened her mouth to scream, but the sound choked in her throat. It was not the gypsy girl at all—a slender boy leaped the fence without pausing to open the gate, and landed in the fennel beside her. It took about a second for Chicken Little to discover that it was neither Sherm nor Carol. She found herself staring into a pair of big black eyes at very short range. The intruder was evidently quite as startled as she was. He stared in amazement for an instant, then giving her a shove that sent her sprawling,

leaped to his feet, and was gone down the side street. Jane let out a yell that could be heard two blocks away, as Sherm testified later, and got to her feet in time to see the boy leap a fence down the block.

Carol was at her elbow in a jiffy.

"What was it? What did you see?"

She pointed toward the fence where the boy had disappeared.

"There—quick—past that barn." She only recovered her wits sufficiently when he was several paces away, to shout, "It's a boy! Carol, it isn't a girl at all—it's a boy!"

Carol stopped in his tracks. He thought Chicken Little had taken leave of her senses.

Chicken Little waved him on, flourishing both hands wildly, and running toward him.

Carol was sensible enough not to stop for explanations. He also jumped the fence beside the barn and disappeared.

Chicken Little was so excited that instead of waiting for Sherm as she should have done, she kept on following Carol. She reached the point where the others had vanished and was standing peering over the fence when someone came up from behind and threw a blanket round her, head and all, and a strange voice hissed angrily into her ear: "I tole you meet me on the corner by the beeg white house. What for you come this-a-way?"

Before she could protest, the stranger had seized her arm and was hurrying her toward the street paralleling Front Street along which Sherm and the officers were hurrying. She could hear the clatter of their horses' hoofs.

Jane was horribly frightened. This must be one of the gypsies who had come to help the thief. If he found out she wasn't his accomplice, what would he do to her? Chicken Little had a vivid imagination. She thought of all the dreadful things she had ever read of in fiction or history or the daily papers. She remembered with awful distinctness a picture in her history of the assassination of Coligny. She was sure the very best she could hope for was to be kidnapped and carried far from Centerville before they could trace her. What would her father and mother say—and Alice—and Katy and Gertie? In the midst of her distress her fancy presented one compensating picture. She guessed Carol would be most awfully sorry he had been so mean to her.

But Jane's opportunity for considering was brief. The gypsy had also heard the sound of the approaching horsemen and was not losing any time getting out of that dangerous neighborhood. He jerked Jane along at a breathless pace till they turned the corner, then hoisted her into an old buckboard, whipping the horses into a run.

Up to this point Chicken Little had been unde-

cided, after her first frightened gasp, whether it was safer to keep still or to scream. But with the first leap forward of the horses, instinct got the better of her, she shrieked with all her might—"Car-ol! Car-ol!"

Her companion jerked the blanket from about her head and took a good look at her. Her gypsy costume had deceived him in the shadow. The oaths came in a perfect volley when he saw the strange face. He pulled up the horses, uncertain what to do. He knew the townspeople were on their trail, and all romantic tales to the contrary—he had no desire to be caught kidnapping—that was too serious an offense. His band made their way about the country subsisting mainly on petty thieving which excited little attention. When one place began to get too hot for them, they quietly disappeared, to reappear forty or fifty miles away.

He was not quick-witted and he hesitated for an instant whether to drop her out there or to carry her a little farther as a protection for himself in case the officers were disposed to shoot. He was just whipping up his horses again, attempting at the same time to stifle her screams with the blanket, when Carol burst from a yard near by, and running after them, succeeded in catching on the rear end of the buckboard and climbing in. The man raised his whip to beat him off. But Jane had recovered her

courage by this time and was fighting to get free with arms and legs and head, butting against the man's side like a young goat.

Under the circumstances the gypsy's aim was poor. Carol dodged the whip and retaliated with a blow on the side of the head with his fist that sent the man almost out of the buckboard. Carol grabbed the reins and pulled the team up short. The man recovering, leaped out, and made off on a run.

"Well," said Carol breathlessly, "he may take himself off for all I care—I've had enough for one night. The police can do the rest. You aren't hurt, are you, Jane? Where do you suppose the old guy came from so unexpectedly?"

"He thought I was the gypsy girl—oh, did you see her—him, Carol?"

"Yep, I 'most had my hands on him, when I heard you scream, bet he's a block away now though. He certainly was some sprinter. Are you sure he was the girl? Perhaps, he was another of the gang waiting round for her. That was the Blair's summer house where he was hiding, and there never used to be but one entrance."

"He came right through the vines—high up—I guess maybe it was a window."

"Well, I was such a fool I never thought to look in the summer house to see if there was anyone else left there."

"Why, of course, you didn't know there was anybody else round but the girl."

"No, it never—— Gee, here they come—the officers—Sherm's up in front of the marshal. There's Mr. Blair running out of his yard—and the people are coming out of that house across the street. You yelled hard enough to wake the dead, Chicken Little. I didn't know a girl could make so much noise."

After a brief consultation, the officers hurried on after the gypsies. Sherm by the marshal's direction got in with Jane and Carol and drove back to the Halford's. They were to take the gypsy's team to the marshal's house after they saw Chicken Little safely home. The marshal evidently held decided views about little girls mixing up in this kind of adventures.

They met Mr. Halford and Dick as they turned into Front Street. They were frantic with anxiety about Chicken Little. They had feared the gypsies might have taken her off when her absence was discovered. She had not been missed for some little time owing to the excitement and confusion following the theft.

When Dick and Mr. Halford heard the account of their doings, Mr. Halford looked sternly at Chicken Little but refrained from saying anything. Dick was not so lenient.

"Chicken Little Jane Morton, I am not much of a believer in corporal punishment, but if I were your daddy—and you did a trick like going off tonight—I'd——"

Dick never finished his sentence. He contented himself with shaking his head menacingly.

But when Alice had satisfied herself that Jane was whole and safe and unharmed, she relieved her mind frankly.

"Chicken Little, you deserve a sound whipping for scaring us all to death like that!"

Chicken Little cried into her pillow that night thoroughly disgraced.

"I don't care," she mourned, "they didn't scold Sherm and Carol one single bit—and they went off without telling anybody. I don't think it's fair to pick on the girl all the time—so there!"

She came down to breakfast the next morning in a very chastened frame of mind. Dick had already been up town to learn the outcome of the evening's happenings. He seemed inclined to regard her prank a little more leniently in the light of what he heard.

"The thief was a boy, Chicken Little, they got on his trail again and chased him to the river—you know it isn't far from the Blair's where you saw him. When he reached the bank, he threw a bundle away and jumped in. Marshal Grow fired a shot over his head to scare him, but the fellow swam for

his life. They got one or two good looks at him and Grow says he didn't look over fifteen."

"How did they know he and the girl were the same?" asked Alice.

"Oh, I've got ahead of my story. They found the dress and a red handkerchief in the bundle and Miss Arnold identified them as the things the gypsy fortune-teller wore. The best of it was, the necklace and ring were knotted up in the handkerchief. Belle was mighty lucky to get them back. I guess it will be a lesson to her not to be wearing her mother's things quite so promiscuously."

"What do you suppose he threw them away for?" asked Alice. "He could easily have put the jewelry in his pocket."

"Well, they had him on the run—and he was just a boy and scared to death. Possibly, he was glad to be rid of his loot for fear they would find it on him," returned Dick.

"Did they catch the man?" ventured Chicken Little.

"No-o! The marshal's good and vexed about their both getting away, too. The man must have hidden some place till they were gone, then swum the river as the boy did. No, the team and buckboard are all they have been able to arrest so far. And I guess you kids were responsible for that." Dick laughed at the recollection of the marshal's

chagrin. "The men about town are guying him pretty roughly—saying he ought to swear you and the boys in as deputies."

Dick looked at Chicken Little to see how she would take this.

Jane reddened. She didn't want to hear anything more about her part in the chase, never to the longest day she lived.

"I don't see why they could not have made the gypsy camp give them up," persisted Alice.

"Gypsy camp! There wasn't any! The rest of the clan evidently pulled out at nightfall leaving the man and the boy to follow in the buckboard. Of course Grow might have followed them up—but it wouldn't have done any good. The town is well rid of them. They won't come back this way in a hurry."

Jane was very much amazed to find, when she stopped for Katy and Gertie on her way to school that morning, that they didn't think she had done anything dreadful at all. Katy was crazy to hear every single detail. So were the girls and boys at school. Jane found herself in the midst of an admiring group at recesses and noon. By night she was quite disposed to consider herself a heroine. Though she had no manner of doubt what her father and mother would say when they heard about her adventure.

She was especially pleased to have Carol praise her when she met him on the way home from school at noon.

He waved his hat a block away.

"Hello—little partner, all right this morning?" He shook hands as if he hadn't seen her for a month. "Chicken Little, you're a downright good fellow—if you are a girl! You'll be a dandy—when you grow up—we'll have that hop yet." Carol grinned teasingly.

But somehow Chicken Little didn't mind his teasing now. The handshake seemed in some way to put them more on a level.

Her interview with Sherm was a little different. He came over to say good-by just before supper. He was going on east by the night train.

"All serene, Lady Jane?" he asked.

Jane's face clouded.

"Sherm, do you think Father and Mother'll feel awful badly about—about——"

Sherm understood.

"Well, Jane, you wouldn't expect them to be exactly pleased to have you running off by yourself after night—not to mention all the talk and fuss, and the risk."

Sherm looked rather sober. He had heard a good deal of talk during the day and he knew that most of the boys even, whatever they might say to

Jane, would not want their little sisters mixed up in such an adventure.

Jane swallowed a little. She began twisting a fold of her dress in her fingers.

"Did you—think—it was very awful, Sherm?"

Sherm hesitated.

"Well, I wish you hadn't, Jane. Of course, I know you didn't stop to think—but you might have been hurt and—don't do anything like that again. Will you, little sister?" He smiled down at her tolerantly.

The smile was the last straw with Jane. She could have stood his disapproval if he had scolded or made fun of her, but—she did want to stand well with Sherm. He seemed to come next to Ernest.

The tears brimmed her eyes in spite of herself and trickled down her cheeks. Sherm was all contrition. "Don't, Jane, please don't! I didn't mean to scold. I'll never forget the way you stood by me last spring. And you were no end plucky last night—a regular brick—it's only that—you understand? Here, quit it now!" Sherm was dabbing the tears away awkwardly, but Jane was due for another cry and she had to have it out.

She did manage to smile a bit at Sherm's mock sternness.

"Jane, you'll make me homesick if you cry like

that. Come on—I'll race you to the fence and back."

Jane won the race, coming back with cheeks pink and eyes dry. But her mind was not easy yet.

"Sherm," she said wistfully, "will you write to Ernest about it? Of course I'm going to, but—it—it would be different if you wrote—he'd understand better. And I don't want Carol to tell him—first."

Chicken Little did not realize what an eloquent plea for white-washing she was making.

"Huh," said Sherm, "you needn't worry about Carol. He thinks you're the bravest piece he ever saw."

"Thank you," said Chicken Little with dignity, "I don't care to be considered a *piece*!"

Chicken Little stalked haughtily off toward the dining-room.

Sherm smiled a wry smile and picked up his cap.

"Aren't girls the darndest?" he exclaimed, relating the incident to Carol a few minutes later. Since he had unintentionally made mischief, he felt in duty bound to warn his friend.

Carol was not disturbed. "Chicken Little's a spunky kid, all right," he said easily. "She needn't be afraid I'll give her away to Ernest—that would be a girl's trick!"



CHAPTER XI PAT'S TESTING

DAME NATURE seemed to be settling down to her winter's work. She was fast taking down all the gay fluttery red and yellow leaves from trees and vines and bushes. The few that were left looked lonesome and seemed to huddle close to the twigs for comfort. The grass was turning brown—and the weeds. But the bitter-sweet berries in the woods were crimson. They had brought in great clusters to lay away for Christmas decorations. Yes, surely Mother Nature was getting ready for something.

Chicken Little liked to go down into the cellar to see the apples and nuts stored there. Dick said Alice was acquisitive as a squirrel the way she hoarded nuts and apples and popcorn. But Alice said Dick could eat more apples than any man she knew. She loved the feeling of having things in store when the first snows came and the wind howled down the chimneys. She thought the squirrels must

have a mighty comfy feeling and pitied the foolish rabbits who had to go out and forage in the snow.

"Which reminds me," said Dick, "that I mean to go rabbit hunting in November. How would you and Katy like to go along, Chicken Little?"

Chicken Little was unanimously in favor of this proposition.

By the end of the first week in November the frosts were heavier and whiter.

"It is 'most time for May's candy-pull," Katy remarked one morning on their way to school, rubbing her numb fingers together ruefully.

Katy had insisted on wearing gloves instead of mittens to school because they were more stylish.

"I told you, your hands would get cold," said Gertie, who was still young enough to prefer comfort to looks.

"Well, if Mother would only let me carry my squirrel muff they wouldn't."

"I guess it wouldn't be nice very long for Sunday if you did. Things get knocked off on the floor so at school." Chicken Little added her mite of wisdom.

But Katy was not in the mood for wisdom, her fingers were stinging.

"Anyhow, I don't think it's so sensible to keep your fingers warm one day in the week with a muff and then let them freeze the other six."

"You needn't if you'd wear mittens," said Jane. Katy decided to change the subject.

"May isn't going to invite Pat. She says her mother doesn't see any reason why she should."

Chicken Little shut her lips together tight.

"Well," said Gertie after a moment's silence, "I guess Pat won't mind. He is 'most always busy in the drug store Saturday evenings anyway. I don't suppose he could come."

"That's all the more reason why it wouldn't hurt May to ask him!" exclaimed Jane whose wrath had been gathering.

"Still, I suppose May can ask whom she pleases—only I don't like it myself. He's in all her classes, too."

The girls discussed the matter all the way to school, but there did not seem to be anything they could do.

Pat would have made very little of this coming slight if he had been informed of it then. He was used to such snubs. Indeed, he hardly considered them snubs. He didn't expect to be included in the young people's frolics now. But he meant to work hard and make a place for himself right here in Centerville—so he would be as good as anybody some day.

But something happened before May's much-

talked-of candy-pull actually was given, which made him feel being left out very acutely.

The Gridleys had grown steadily fond of Pat. He was so willing to work. He asked few favors himself yet was always ready to grant them. Dr. Gridley boasted he had never known the boy to utter an untruth or to try to cover up a mistake. As Dick Harding said, it was a record very few "mother's pets" could live up to.

But now things looked ugly for Pat despite his good record. He was clerking in the drug store on Saturday evenings and usually for half the day Sunday. And lately Mr. Barr, the proprietor, had been missing money Saturday nights, and only Saturday nights. The two regular clerks in the store had been with him several years and he trusted them implicitly. One was a middle-aged man with a family.

The money was disappearing in small sums, two or three dollars at a time. Mr. Barr confessed that he had been a little careless about making up his cash and the thieving might have been going on longer than he thought.

He, too, liked Pat and hated to accuse him, but the fact that the thefts were so small and always happened on Saturday night, seemed to him pretty conclusive evidence. No man would stoop to thieving for such small sums, he reasoned. But a few

dollars a week might make all the difference to a High School boy. And he had noticed that Pat had been dressing a good deal better this past year. He bought good ties and nice handkerchiefs and had his shoes shined. Mr. Barr considered him a bit of a dude in the light of his humble origin. He did not speak of the matter to anyone but his wife for several weeks, but he watched Pat carefully and set little traps for him, such as making him think he was alone near the money drawer, and marking bills.

But Pat did not slip into any of these pitfalls.

Mr. Barr had asked Jones, the cashier in one of the banks, to look out for the marked bills. Several of them drifted in, but the cashier only succeeded in tracing one, which had come with the deposit from a candy store. No one at the candy store had any recollection as to who had paid it in.

Mr. Barr regarded this as additional evidence against Pat. For again, he argued, the boy would be more likely to be buying candy than the men.

He finally decided that it was his duty to go to Dr. Gridley and tell him what he suspected.

At first the doctor was almost angry that he should suspect the boy, defending him vigorously.

But after Mr. Barr had gone Dr. Gridley wondered if Pat could have been tempted. He knew the lad had been made a good deal of by his mates since the ball game. He had been elected vice-

president of his class. It had not escaped the doctor's keen eyes that he was paying more and more attention to dressing neatly. He thought this a good indication in the boy. It had seemed to him to show that Pat was responding to his improved surroundings—that it revealed an innate fineness. Now, he wondered. Pat was not given to talking much of his ambitions. Possibly the lad was merely developing a cheap taste for dress.

Dr. Gridley studied over the matter for several days. He, too, was tempted to test Pat's honesty. He left a quarter on the seat of the buggy when he turned the team over to Pat to put away. It was handed to him the moment the boy entered the house. Another time he left a dollar bill on the floor and sent him into his office after his coat. Pat noticed the money, picked it up, and brought it to his employer.

Just as Dr. Gridley was rejoicing in these evidences of character, Pat came home one evening with a large, rather mysterious-looking package, which had a wrapper from the same candy store Mr. Barr had mentioned.

"What have you there, Pat?" he asked carelessly.

To his surprise Pat seemed embarrassed and muttered: "Oh, nothing much."

Mrs. Gridley also saw the package and inquired about it. Pat returned her an evasive answer also.

This rather disturbed her, though for an entirely different reason from the one that worried the doctor.

"That looked like a cake to me. Do you suppose we're not giving the boy enough to eat?"

"Nonsense, Mother, you feed us all too much. If it was a cake, maybe the youngsters are having a surprise party or something and this is his contribution."

"Well, he needn't have gone and bought an expensive cake. I would have been glad to bake him one."

After supper Pat took the mysterious parcel, which he carried most carefully, and was gone, perhaps, half an hour. He returned and settled down to his studies for the remainder of the evening. The next evening he was at home all evening. Dr. Gridley began to wonder what he did have in that parcel, for this knocked out the surprise party theory.

He took the trouble to inquire of Katy Halford the next day if there had been a spread or anything festive at the High School.

"Spread?" said Katy, "you must be thinking of boarding schools. You don't suppose Professor Bates would let us have a spread in school, do you?"

"No, I suppose Bates would have to unbend considerably to countenance that."

Chicken Little was with Katy and she was won-

dering why Dr. Gridley was interested in their doings. Perhaps he thought young people should not be piecing between meals. Then an idea occurred to her.

"If you are thinking about that cake of Pat's, Doctor, he took it to little Maggie Murphy for her birthday—she is about the same age as his sister Maggie was when she died. He brought it to me to put the candles on, is the reason I know."

Dr. Gridley was relieved but not for long. He noticed the boy seemed to have something on his mind. He was quieter than usual, scarcely talking even to his beloved parrot. The doctor could hear the bird coaxing for attention often in the evening. Pat seemed too deep in his studies to heed him.

The following Sunday morning, Mr. Barr stopped the doctor on his way to church, to say that five dollars in one dollar bills had disappeared the preceding evening. He was at a loss how to act. He did not like to accuse Pat on such insufficient evidence. On the other hand he could not afford to be losing several dollars every week through thefts.

Dr. Gridley advised him to wait a little longer. Something definite might turn up.

That afternoon the doctor had a telegram calling him to a neighboring town. He had only a few minutes left to catch his train when he discovered to his confusion that he had not enough money in

the house to pay his railroad fare. Mrs. Gridley's purse yielded a lone dime.

Pat was standing by waiting to drive the doctor to the station.

"I think I've got enough," he said.

Reaching into his pocket he counted out four one dollar bills.

"Wasn't it lucky, Mr. Barr paid me these this morning? He gives me two dollars for what I do in the store Saturdays and Sunday mornings, and he forgot to pay me last week."

Pat gave this explanation with apparent frankness.

The doctor was more worried than he cared to confess.

Matters ran on for a few days longer until one day Dr. Gridley sent the boy to the drug store in a hurry for some medicine he needed. In his haste he neglected to tell him to charge it. Pat speedily returned with the drug having paid for it himself.

That same day Mr. Barr called Dr. Gridley in as he was passing the store.

"Well, I've got the proof I have been looking for at last. Look here!" He thrust a marked dollar bill under his nose. "Pat handed me that himself this morning."

His face was rather eager as if he were pleased, Dr. Gridley thought. This was not true. Mr. Barr

liked Pat and was loath to believe ill of him. But he had worried over the uncertainty so long, he was glad to have definite proof that he might be sure he was not accusing the boy unjustly.

To Dr. Gridley it was a blow. He had kept on believing in Pat even when compelled to own that things looked bad for him. But this seemed convincing. He sorrowfully admitted that the merchant would be justified in accusing Pat. He requested him to do it in his presence. He, if anyone, should befriend the boy in this crisis. Perhaps, it would be a lesson that would keep him straight in future.

It was arranged that Mr. Barr should call that evening. Dr. Gridley asked him not to speak of it to anyone else. There was no need to ruin the boy's future for a first offense.

The doctor's heart was heavy. His gray hair was so ruffled it stood up fiercely above his ruddy face. His wife noticed his abstraction and lack of appetite.

"Why, John, you are scarcely eating a thing! You aren't sick, are you?"

"No, I was just thinking." The doctor looked up to find Pat watching his face solicitously.

"Well, you'd better stop thinking at meal times. You can't work as hard as you do without eating. Can he, Pat?"

"Couldn't I take the medicine out to Crag's

tonight for you, sir, and you wait till morning for your call? I could take the child's temperature and pulse. I used to do it for Mother you know."

The boy's thoughtfulness was almost too much for the doctor. He felt as if he and Mr. Barr were plotting to stick a knife into him. But there was the evidence. It was the only real kindness to the boy to give him a chance to clear himself if he could. Nevertheless, he could not sit still while he waited for Mr. Barr to appear.

He had not long to wait. Mr. Barr was nervously anxious to have the disagreeable task over with.

Pat seemed very much surprised, when obeying Dr. Gridley's summons, he found his other employer, Mr. Barr, there. He noticed instantly that they both looked very grave. What could have happened? He stood there looking from one to the other wonderingly.

Dr. Gridley was quick to note that he did not seem disturbed or uneasy at Mr. Barr's being there. If the boy had a guilty conscience he showed no outward sign of it. Dr. Gridley motioned him to be seated.

"Mr. Barr has something to say to you, Pat."

Mr. Barr hemmed and cleared his throat twice before he could limber up his tongue.

"Pat, I'm downright sorry to have to come to you on such an errand. I wouldn't believe it myself at

first. I've always liked you, boy, and you have been a first-class worker, I'll say that for you. If I'd known you were needing more money, I'd rather have paid you a little more wages, than have you do this."

The boy's face had been slowly growing white as he listened. It was plain he was being accused—Mr. Barr's last words made it evident—but of what?

He did not wait for any more.

"Are you after hinting I've been stealing, sir?" He took a step nearer Mr. Barr, looking him straight in the eyes.

It was the latter who showed evidences of confusion. His next words were apologetic.

"I'm sorry to have to, Pat. But I've got the evidence right here in my pocket. And Dr. Gridley will bear me out that I've waited till I was sure so as not to do you any injustice. You know better than I, Pat, how long this has been going on—and what tempted you. I hope you'll make a clean breast of it. I'm not wanting to prosecute you—you're but a boy. I am hoping it will be such a lesson to you that you'll never be tempted to do such a thing——"

Again Pat interrupted. "I don't know what you're talking about! Will you please be telling me, sir, quick?"

Dr. Gridley was studying Pat's face. If the boy were acting, he was amazingly clever.

Mr. Barr was irritated at the lad's brazening it out this way.

"Yes, I'll tell you darned quick, young fellow, you've been taking money out of my till every Saturday night for several weeks and the sums have been getting bigger lately. And I set a trap for the thief by marking some bills with a tiny B—and you brought one of those bills in this afternoon yourself and paid it right into my hands. Now, what have you got to say for yourself?"

For lingering seconds Pat stood there staring at Mr. Barr as if turned into stone. Dr. Gridley could not endure the scene.

"Don't be afraid to speak up for yourself, Boy. You are in the hands of your friends. Tell us all about it."

Pat turned like a flash to Dr. Gridley.

"Do you be after believing this, sir?"

Something came up in Dr. Gridley's throat. He would have given the world to be able to answer no. But the evidence was hard to disbelieve.

"I am waiting to hear what you have to say, Pat."

"I've never taken a thing that didn't belong to me in me life, sir. I couldn't be facin' me mother if I had. She always said we could be dacent and honest, if we was poor. I know you'll not be be-

lievin' me, but I don't know anything about your old money. I paid you one of the bills you gave me yourself, sir."

A look of relief came over Dr. Gridley's face. "Isn't it possible you might have made that mistake, Barr?"

"No," said Mr. Barr shortly, "it isn't! I was most careful about that very thing. I took the money out of my trousers' pocket to hand to him."

"Yes," said Pat, considering a moment, "you did. I remember."

Both men stared at him gaping. Was it innocence or effrontery—his helping to build up the chain of evidence against himself?

Mr. Barr decided it was impudence. "Then what have you to say for yourself?" he demanded crisply. "How did you come by that marked bill?"

"I have told you all I know, sir," insisted the boy doggedly.

"Come, come, this won't do, Pat. Lying out of it won't do you any good. You'd much better tell the truth."

The boy stood staring at him. He swallowed a little as if his mouth were parched, but he did not reply.

"I'm waiting, Pat." Mr. Barr's face was stern.

"I've told you the truth," the words came almost in a whisper.

His accuser was growing angry.

"Maybe if I was to have you arrested, you could tell more. I want to know what you've done with that money. Most of those marked bills have never reached either of the banks. Jones went to the other bank to have them keep a lookout. If you'll pay back the money and confess, Pat, I'm ready to drop the matter right here."

"Maybe, I can pay the money, if you'll tell me how much it is. I have a hundred dollars in the bank. But I never stole a cent of it—I'd be telling you what isn't so, if I said I did."

Mr. Barr considered a moment.

"Very well, you may give me a check for twenty-five dollars. It's more than that—but I don't know exactly how much. But you understand, Pat, I can't employ you again—and I can't recommend you to anyone else. And you will find it mighty hard to get anything better than ditch-digging without a character from me. If you'd confess I might be lenient, seeing as you are still a boy."

Pat stood looking at him in silence.

After a moment Dr. Gridlev spoke. "We might as well end this for tonight. You would better get your check book, Pat, and give Mr. Barr the money. I'll endorse it for you."

The boy left the room and returned about five minutes later with the check properly made out for

twenty-five dollars. Dr. Gridley signed his name on the back and Mr. Barr departed with a curt good-night.

Pat listened to his departing footsteps, then turned imploring eyes upon the doctor.

It was the doctor's mouth that was parched now. He was heartily sorry for the orphan lad. He did not want to believe this thing of him—but it certainly looked bad—even his willingness to pay back the money.

"Better get back to your lessons, Pat."

The boy passed close to him on his way to the door. Dr. Gridley put out his hand and laid it gently on his shoulders. "We've been mighty fond of you, Son."

The tenderness of his "Son" unlocked the flood-gates. Tears streamed down Pat's face soundlessly. He gripped the doctor's hand for an instant, then bolted upstairs.

The doctor sat far into the night going over the years of Pat's stay with them, weighing every little thing in the boy's past with reference to this. Then he studied over the other men in the drug store. He determined to do a little sleuthing himself for Pat's sake. But he had scant hope of clearing him. He had known both clerks for years. Neither had bad habits. In this little town they could not long have concealed the fact if they had had.

It was past midnight when he went up to his room. He had told his wife he must look up a matter in his medical works. He evaded when she asked what Mr. Barr wanted with Pat. The fewer who knew about this the better, for the present.

He stopped by Pat's door to listen. The boy was talking almost in whispers to the parrot. He could hear an occasional sleepy guttural from Polly in return.

Pat was not sleeping. Dr. Gridley was glad the boy was not taking it lightly. That ought to be a good sign. He had a sudden renewal of confidence.

"I don't believe he did it! And if he did he'll tell me sooner or later. He's not a bad boy at heart. I am going to stand by him!"

Perhaps, it was a pity Pat did not know what went on outside of his door. He dropped asleep toward morning feeling that the green bird perched on the foot-board of his bed was the only companion he could ever hold up his head before, again.

He was awakened in the morning by Polly's shrill piping for food.

"Chicken Little! Chicken Little!"

Polly still called his old mistress when he wished to be fed.

And Pat reflected bitterly that Chicken Little, too, must hear soon and think him unworthy. Possibly she would want the parrot back—when she knew.



CHAPTER XII HUNTING WITH DICK

MAY HALFORD's candy-pull came off gayly a week before Thanksgiving. It was a big affair. A large part of the senior class at the High School, with Katy, Gertie, Chicken Little, and several of May's younger friends were invited and she had few regrets. Her mother openly mourned that their house wouldn't be fit to live in after that mob of youngsters messed it up with candy. But May was an only child. She had set her heart on a candy-pull and a candy-pull it had to be.

"Never mind, Mother," May's father had comforted, "candy isn't like grease. A little warm water will take it off afterwards."

His wife replied with a sigh: "Every single young person who isn't sick is coming. I don't so much mind the girls—but the boys!" She lifted her hands in despair as visions of taffy ground into her Brussels carpets confronted her. "I had planned to keep them in the kitchen and back porch for the actual pulling, but May has invited so many there won't be room. We'll have to use the dining-room, too."

One person who was not invited was painfully aware that May had invited "'most everybody," except himself. Pat's disgrace had become semi-public property. Mr. Barr had been too irritated at the boy's stubborn denial to keep the matter longer to himself. It would have been difficult to prevent its leaking out even if he had kept silent. Everyone presently knew that Pat was no longer clerking at the Barr drug store, and many persons promptly desired to know why, after the manner of the small town.

Pat himself looked so white and disturbed that both his teachers and school-mates wondered what ailed him. They would very soon have put two and two together even if Mr. Barr had kept his secret.

Chicken Little and Katy and Gertie were among the last to hear the news because they were known to be friends of the lad's. They caught maddening fragments of chatter hastily hushed on their approach, for a day or two before they learned the truth. Dick Harding heard it early and was mightily indignant.

"I'd stake my bottom dollar on the boy's honesty," he told Dr. Gridley to that gentleman's great satisfaction.

Dr. Gridley had decided that evidence or no evidence, he would not believe that Pat was guilty unless the boy himself acknowledged he was. His associates assured him he was letting his affection for

Pat run away with his judgment. And the doctor was secretly afraid he was. He was delighted to have so keen a lawyer as Dick Harding back him up.

"There is no use talking," he said to the latter, "the evidence seems dead against him. But I have had him in my house going on three years—I know him and his ways pretty thoroughly, and I never knew him to tell me an untruth or to take anything that didn't belong to him. And he doesn't act guilty. I guess I have seen something of human nature in almost forty years of practice. I know a few things—if they do call me a confiding old fool! And I figure if the boy is guilty, he's only a boy—and he's had mighty little in his life. A little mite of trust that he doesn't deserve, won't hurt him nearly as much as a lot of distrust that maybe he doesn't deserve either."

"Put her there!" said Dick heartily, "I'm with you! I don't believe Pat took the money! If he did—why we'll help him to make a man of himself in spite of it."

Dick promptly told Alice not to tell the girls.

"It may take the news some time to get into the High School. In the meantime there's no need to worry the kids—and something may turn up in the case."

But nothing seemed to turn up.

When Chicken Little came home from school one

afternoon with very red eyes and very red cheeks and a general air of battle in her appearance, Alice was not at a loss to know what the matter was or how she had taken it.

Dick had been hoping the girls would stand by Pat. Alice wondered about Katy and Gertie because she knew Mr. Halford felt the proof against the boy was conclusive. She waited now to hear from Chicken Little what they had said.

But Jane did not seem inclined to pour out her woes as promptly as she usually did. She slipped up to her room and did not show herself again till supper time. Alice began to wonder what could have happened to make her so self-contained. The truth was that Jane had been so utterly dismayed by the number of her mates who had turned against Pat, that she was afraid even her beloved Alice and Dick might have deserted him also. There had been talk at the school that afternoon of asking Pat to get off the ball nine.

Jane was a new pupil, and only a freshman, but she had not hesitated to tell anybody and everybody who would listen, what she thought of such a course. Now, if Alice and Dick said she was wrong she couldn't—she just couldn't—bear it! A fresh burst of tears came every time she thought of the possibility.

It wasn't as if Pat had a home and parents to look

after him, she argued. If only Sherm were there—or Ernest—or somebody who could make them listen! The boys said the girls were always tender-hearted and softy—of course, they wouldn't believe anything wrong about a good-looking chap like Pat Casey. One of them had told her quite frankly to mind her own business—this was the boy's affair.

So Chicken Little came to the supper table with eyes a little more swollen, if possible, than when she came in from school. She tried to choke down the food, but even the hot muffins and honey Alice had provided especially to tempt her appetite, stuck in her throat.

Dick came to the rescue.

"Out with it, little girl, is it Pat's trouble?"

Jane laid her head down on her arms on the table, regardless of etiquette, and sobbed. "It isn't—fair!—It isn't a single bit—fair!—suppose it was Ernest. Suppose it was one of them, I guess they wouldn't be in such a hurry to drop him!—Just because Pat is poor and hasn't any friends to help him fight back——"

Dick interrupted. "Pat seems to have one friend, Chicken Little, a nice sympathetic indignant little friend. Does he know it, Chicken Little?"

This was a new thought.

Jane suddenly hushed and considered.

"No, I—I haven't seen him to tell him. He hasn't

given anybody a chance to speak to him for a week or two. I suppose that's why—I——" Jane was recalling several small happenings from a new point of view.

"Then tell him, Jane. It helps a lot to be told you have friends when anything goes wrong."

"You don't believe he's——" She lifted wet appealing eyes without finishing the question.

"No, Jane, I don't! But I think it is going to be confounded hard to clear him from the charge. There doesn't seem to be the least clew pointing to anyone else. I have been putting in the best part of two days hunting for one—the real thief has covered his tracks most precious well. The truth will probably come out some time, all right. But we must hold fast to our belief in him and help him to hold on to his own self-respect or he may give up the fight in despair. It is an infernal shame. The boy had made so much of himself against such odds—and then to have this happen——" Dick shook his head despairingly by way of finishing his sentence.

"What do Katy and Gertie think?" asked Alice.

"Gertie says he didn't, right out—but Katy isn't sure, though she says she thinks we ought to stand by him even if he did. She says her Sunday school teacher said you could often help people up, by pre-

tending to believe in them. As if Pat would want that kind of friends!"

"I fear a pretended belief wouldn't go very far," said Alice. "We must try to win Katy over to a real faith in Pat. We can't have the lad's life ruined by a cruel accident."

Another poignant thought had surged into Chicken Little's brain. "And May Halford didn't invite him, and I just know he thinks that's the reason. I'm not going one step to her old party, so there! And I'll make Gertie stay at home, too. Maybe some of the boys on the nine would—they are 'most all standing by him, Katy says."

"No, Jane," said Dick earnestly, "that wouldn't do. May has a right to invite whom she pleases to her home. You said she didn't mean to ask Pat long before this came up. We think she is making a mistake but—well, you wouldn't think it fair if you were giving a party and May tried to say whom you should invite and threatened to stay away if you didn't agree. Now, would you? That would be unfair—and childish in the bargain. No, my dear, we will let other people act as their consciences dictate—that's their affair—not ours. All we can do is to try to see that they don't do Pat any harm. Here, you and Alice and I will form a Pat society and look after him a bit. Cheer up, Chicken Little.

How about going hunting next Saturday and taking Pat along?"

Chicken Little's face lighted.

"Oh-h!" she exclaimed, "that would be the very thing. Do you suppose he can go? He does a lot of extra things for Dr. Gridley Saturdays."

"I think," said Dick, "the doctor will be glad to let Pat off under the circumstances. And I'll bet a day in the woods with such fine companionship as yours and mine and Katy's will come pretty near setting him up in business. Eh, Alice?"

"It would go a long way, Dick, I firmly believe. There's nothing like the outdoors to heal our hurts. I'll put you up a wonderful lunch. Jane will be tired and cross after May's party the night before—but that will be a good way to work it off." Now, finish your supper, Jane. I'll have the Swedish lady bring some hot muffins."

Pat *was* hurt. He tried to persuade himself that May Halford never had been specially friendly and probably never thought of inviting him. But every other boy on the ball nine was invited while he—the captain, was left out. It surely must be the theft. He didn't believe a nice girl would cut him so needlessly for any trivial reason. Pat felt numbed these days. He felt as if everybody he met were pointing at him and whispering *thief* to themselves.

He forced himself to go to school—forced himself to study—forced himself to do every single thing that he had done before so gladly in the hope of the good time coming when he would be somebody. He thought there wasn't any hope ahead, yet he was secretly hoping every waking minute. Hoping that he would be cleared—hoping that Chicken Little would stand by him—and the nine—and his teachers. The boy's heart went out in gratitude to Dr. Gridley and to Dick Harding for their cordial kindness. But he could not be quite sure that they, even, believed in him. It might be just Christian charity toward a friendless boy. Pat's daily bread was indeed bitter these days.

When Chicken Little called, "Pat, oh, Pat, I want to speak to you!" loudly and cheerfully just as he was slipping with the crowd into the assembly room, he turned round eagerly. Dick Harding had instructed Jane to go to Pat in the most crowded place she could find, and to invite him as loudly and impressively as possible to go hunting with them. And Jane carried out the instructions to the letter. She was reinforced by Katy and Gertie.

"Dick wants you specially, Pat, and he's arranged with Dr. Gridley so you needn't try to make excuses—and it's going to be the biggest lark, just you and me and Katy and Dick—it will be very select you see." This last for May Halford's benefit—who

with everyone else in the vicinity, was looking in their direction.

What could Pat do but accept, taken by storm in this wise. He stammered out something about liking to go. And Chicken Little urged him to be on hand at eight A.M. sharp, also in a cheerfully loud tone of voice. Katy rose to the occasion beautifully, calling after him as he was moving on, "I bet I shoot more rabbits than you do, Pat."

The little incident had a distinct effect on public sentiment in the school. A meeting which had been called by some zealous defenders of the school honor to decide whether they ought to request one Patrick Casey to resign as captain of the baseball nine, was postponed until the first of the week. Dick Harding was very popular among the High School boys and not a little looked up to. If he was taking Pat in, possibly the rest of them were being too hasty.

That evening at May's the battle for and against Pat, was waged royally with eager young tongues. A number demanded to know if Mr. Harding had heard anything new about the matter. Chicken Little was dying to say yes, but she had been brought up to tell the truth.

"I don't know about any new evidence," she said loftily. "We know Pat didn't take that old money and I should think you all knew him well enough to know he wouldn't."

"Well," retorted one girl snippily, "my mother wouldn't want me going round with a thief even if Mr. Harding does make a pet of him."

Chicken Little's eyes flashed fire, but quick-witted Katy was ahead of her.

"Of course not, Matty, some people *have* to be very careful, but everybody knows the Hardings."

The vagueness of Katy's charge was hard to combat. The boys and girls tittered. Matty contented herself with retorting that some other people she knew thought themselves a lot smarter than they were.

Saturday dawned golden and frosty. A light snow had fallen the night before which promised to be gone by noon.

"It will last longer in the timber," said Dick. "Chicken Little, this will be a record day. Alice, we'll bring you so many rabbits you won't know what to do with them. You'd better come along and help carry them home."

"Not much," said Alice. "I shall do my part if I stand guard over the Swedish lady while she cooks them. She's sure to do something weird if I don't. Don't you dare to forget your rubbers, Chicken Little. Sure you have matches to light a fire, Dick? You'll be good and ready for hot coffee on a day like this."

Pat's face was pathetically bright and eager when

he arrived at the Harding home that morning. He was to carry one of Dick's guns. The young ladies were expected to borrow the gentlemen's weapons when they wished to shoot.

Dick outdid himself in nonsense as they trudged along. But when they reached the edge of the timber, joking was forgotten in the beauty of the snowy woods. The trees stood bare at last save for the vivid red clusters of bittersweet berries that were plentiful everywhere. But the sunshine shimmered palely golden among the tracery of brown twigs and brought out the gleaming crystals of the snow.

Chicken Little stopped stock still and took in deep breaths of the wonderful frosty air.

"It is so beautiful it takes my breath away. It makes you think that God is so—so—tender to plan all this. Do you think the little wild things that live here enjoy it? Is it lovely to them, do you suppose, Dick?"

Dick smiled. "Pretty deep water you're getting into, there, Jane. If you go to giving these same wild things our feelings, I shan't dare to kill any rabbits today. And the farmers say they are an awful pest this fall already. I move we get the rabbits first and take up this subject later. What say, Pat?"

Pat grinned. "Maybe it'd be safer to get them before they get us. We'd not be having the heart to shoot them if we watched them awhile."

"No," said Dick more soberly, "we wouldn't. Yet it certainly seems as right to kill the rabbits for food as cattle and sheep which are absolutely harmless, while the rabbits destroy the crops when they are too plentiful. There certainly are things to be said against hunting as an amusement. I always try to be very careful never to lose a wounded bird or rabbit. If you kill them instantly, it is a more merciful end than nature is likely to grant the little creatures."

"I don't see why nature doesn't establish a nice little out-door hospital for the wild things," said Katy. "It would be just as easy as heaps of things it does do."

"Bright idea, Katy, nature does furnish a sort of free dispensary in some of her medicinal herbs and in water. Katy, here are two fine sets of rabbit tracks going in opposite directions. Shall we follow one lead, and let Jane and Pat try the other? Don't get excited, Chicken Little, and mistake Katy's gray hood for a rabbit."

Jane could not think of a blessed thing to say when she found herself trailing along with Pat. And the lad was equally tongue-tied.

Alice had told Jane not to open the subject of Pat's trouble. Unless he brought it up himself she would do better just to make him forget all about it for one day.

Pat was glad to forget it. Indeed, it seemed almost like a bad dream out here in the silent woods with these kind friends. A rabbit startled from the brush broke the silence.

Pat swung his gun to his shoulder and tried to aim coolly. The rabbit fled with a celerity that proved he was in no need of a hospital as yet.

Pat laughed a little shame-facedly.

"Serves me right for forgetting that you might like the first shot. Will you try it next time? The gun is rather heavy for a girl but I can help you steady it."

"I think I'd better watch you awhile before I try, Pat. I've never done much shooting. I am always afraid I might hit something. But I love to shoot at a mark."

A shot from the timber near by and a jubilant shout from Dick announced that he had had better luck.

Pat soon matched it with a successful shot. Rabbits were plentiful in the timber and the snow made it easy to track them. Chicken Little shot three times and hit a tree on the second try. The rabbits did not wait for her to improve her marksmanship.

She was a little nettled when she discovered later that Katy had shot two.

"I am an awful goose, Pat. I'm going to try harder so you won't be ashamed of me."

She insisted on making one more try before lunch. Dick said he and Katy would start the fire and have the coffee boiling. He gave her exactly fifteen minutes to bag her rabbit.

And Jane got it in fourteen, though she declared the rabbit assisted at his own funeral, for he darted out almost under their feet, ran a little way and sat up to listen, in plain view. She declined to pick up the victim when he fell.

"I'm not going to—I'm not going to—another single time!" she wailed when Pat brought it to her. "I killed that poor thing because I was nasty jealous of Katy. I like to go hunting—but I don't want to kill anything. You can laugh if you want to, Pat Casey."

Pat was not laughing. Indeed, it took a good deal to make Pat laugh these days.

"I know—hunting isn't girl's sport, but it's fine to be in the woods, and a man wants to know how to handle a gun. I guess I won't shoot any more today either—I have as many rabbits as Mrs. Gridley can use."

Dick laughed at Jane's woe-begone face.

"Chicken Little, as a huntress you are not a howl-

ing success. But I will bet on you when it comes to consuming Alice's doughnuts. Hurry up—I'm starved!"

After dinner the hunting party sat round the fire and told stories till they began to feel stiff. Dick suggested that they hunt bird's nests and bitter-sweet berries for the remainder of the afternoon, since they had all the rabbits they could comfortably carry.

Katy burst out unexpectedly on their way home with her ideas on the subject of hunting.

"I don't see what's the difference in hunting things for other people to eat, and in eating them after other people have killed them for you to eat. They get killed just the same. I don't like to see them either—they look so sort of pitiful. But I perfectly dote on tramping round this way. And I love to do the things the boys do—just to show them I can—they always think girls are such sissies!"

Katy delivered her sentiments with a little toss of her head which Dick declared was very Katyish.

"Katy, when I get out a scientific work on the subject of hunting, I'll quote you. You are worth listening to."

They tramped home through town to get the mail, so Dick said. But they succeeded in advertising to the good people of Centerville that Mr. Richard



“Hurry up. I’m starved”

Harding did not believe the accusations against young Patrick Casey.

Pat did not quite realize the extent of Dick's championship. But he knew that in some mysterious way the sting of his utter loneliness had been drawn that day, and he felt that he could once more hold up his head among his mates.

And Katy remarked sagely after Pat left them, "I think it is perfectly silly to suspect Pat. Anybody could see by the way he acts he didn't do it."

Dick puckered his mouth into a whistle, but thought better of it. Instead, he observed approvingly: "Them's my sentiments too, Katy."

But Jane found an even pleasanter surprise waiting her at the house in the form of a letter from Carol. It wasn't a very long letter, but its ending made her eyes shine. It read:

"I think that is a confounded shame about Pat Casey! I don't care a hang for Pat—never did—he isn't my sort. But if there ever was an honest soul, it's Pat—I'll say that for him. Old Mother Casey drummed that into him to stay. You may tell him for me that I'm blamed sorry."

Chicken Little gave a squeal of delight at that last sentence, and was for setting off immediately to deliver the message. Alice restrained her.

"Pat has had enough petting for one day. Better save it up. But I do believe it will mean more to him coming from Carol Brown than from any other person I could think of. And it lifts Carol himself several pegs in my esteem, I can tell you."

"Oh, I'm so glad!—I'm so glad!" Jane seized Katy round the waist and danced a jig by way of relieving her feelings. "I think it's perfectly dear of Carol—I don't care if he is conceited—so there!"



CHAPTER XIII A MYSTERY UNRAVELLED

CHICKEN LITTLE had no use for Mr. Barr. She considered him unjust and unkind and stupid and several other undesirable things. It was the more awkward on this account that Mr. Barr's six-year-old daughter just starting into school in the primary grade, should have taken a fancy to Chicken Little. Every noon and recess she lay in wait for her to look adoringly into her face and carry her books a little way. For some time past she had been bringing Jane little presents, which was even more embarrassing.

"I don't want to hurt the baby," Chicken Little complained to Alice, "but she's an awful pest—she makes me feel so silly. Some of the boys call out, 'Mary has a little lamb' the minute they see her coming. She's a cunning little thing but I don't want her sticking to me like a plaster."

Alice sympathized, but told her the child would probably get tired soon and stop hanging round so much. In the meantime she would better avoid her whenever possible and decline her presents.

The presents had consisted mostly of flowers and candy and apples so far. But the Monday after the hunting party, little Lucy presented her with a beautiful brocaded sash which had been displayed for several days in the window of one of the dry goods stores. Chicken Little was astounded at such a costly gift. She thought Lucy's mother must have bought it for Lucy, and the child had brought it to her without permission. She told Lucy she would better take it home and ask her mother about it—that she did not want her to be giving her things.

The child insisted upon her taking it. She said she had bought it for her, her very own self. Chicken Little still declined and the little girl turned away quite crestfallen.

Chicken Little felt sorry for her and watched her, regretting that she had been so decided as to hurt her small adorer. The child lagged along for several rods as if she were loath to go home. Then to Jane's surprise, she suddenly straightened up, flung the sash, which was loosely wrapped in a not-over-clean piece of paper, into the ditch and ran towards home.

"Why, the idea," thought Chicken Little, "the

little spitfire! I never supposed she had such a temper."

She went back and picked up the parcel and put it in her school-book bag, thinking she would give it to Lucy's teacher and explain about it. They had company at the house that evening and she did not think to mention the matter to Alice.

The next morning the sash had slipped down into the bottom of her bag, and she forgot all about it for several days.

They were having exciting times in school that week, for which Midshipman Carol Brown was indirectly responsible. He had regaled a number of the younger boys while at home with accounts of the hazing exploits at Annapolis. The boys who belonged to the sophomore class were seized with the idea of introducing this exciting custom into the Centerville High School, for the purpose of educating the freshies who were all extremely callow, ranging from twelve to fifteen years of age.

Their first scheme was to lock some of them in one of the school rooms overnight. One of the sophomore boys beguiled five of the freshman boys into Miss Burch's room after she had left the building, for a class meeting, on pretense of helping them organize. This room was on the top floor and the janitor usually cleaned the top floor as soon as school adjourned. The boys had borrowed the key from

him by telling him they wanted to fetch some article Miss Burch had forgotten.

It was almost five o'clock and rapidly growing dusk when the perfidious sophomore shepherded the unfortunate freshmen into the shadowy classroom. He expressed surprise that more of the class were not present and generously offered to go scouting after them. Drawing the door slyly to behind him, he quickly turned the key on his confiding victims, considerately leaving it in the lock for the janitor to open the door the following morning.

The closing of the door awakened the freshmen's suspicions. The grating of the key in the lock confirmed them.

"Well, of all the suckers, we are——" the boy paused too disgusted for words.

With one accord the boys rushed to the door and tried to force it open. It was a well-made hardwood door with a strong lock and it yielded not one inch. They pounded and yelled in vain. Beside the fleeing sophomore and three of his confederates gleefully awaiting him on the floor below, the janitor was the only man in the building. The trapped lads pounded and yelled till both throats and knuckles were raw. Then they rested and considered.

They were on the third floor at the back of the school building. Beneath them lay the playgrounds and outbuildings. There was no other house in the block. There was no probability that anyone would

come back to the school building again that night. The wily sophomores had thought all this out carefully. The one thing they had not thought of was that the room would soon be stone cold and remain so until five o'clock the next morning when the janitor came to start the fires. They had not intended that their captives should actually suffer.

But the room was already growing chilly. The prospect facing the freshmen was certainly not cheering. They were morally sure the janitor had gone home or he would have heard their uproar. To stay there cold and hungry all night was unthinkable.

They raised a window and leaning far out practiced community yelling for several unfruitful minutes.

"I can't see a soul—we might as well be in a graveyard!" exclaimed one boy in disgust.

"Well, we've got to keep it up. Somebody's bound to go by over on Front Street pretty soon. They can surely hear us there!"

"Oh, they'll hear us all right. The trouble is, they'll probably think it's some kids hollering just for a joke. Drat those sophs—if we don't get even with them my name isn't John Palmer!"

"Huh! I guess we've got to get out before we get even with anybody. But we might as well rest till we see somebody going along Front Street. We can watch that open space by the street lamp."

Chicken Little had sauntered carelessly homeward that evening without her school bag. There were to be examinations on the morrow. She was discussing them with Katy and Gertie over a pan of popcorn in the Halford sitting-room, when she suddenly discovered that her books were all at school.

"What shall I do?" she wailed. "I can't study—and I know I can't pass if I don't."

"I could let you have my algebra till supper-time," Gertie offered.

"You could go back and get them," suggested Katy. "The janitor doesn't leave the building till six o'clock."

"I guess I'd better. Will you girls go with me? Alice wouldn't want me to go alone so late."

It was quite dark by the time the girls reached the schoolhouse. The front of the building was unlighted and loomed dark and forbidding in the dim light of the street lamp on the corner.

"Dear me, I am afraid the janitor has gone," said Gertie.

Chicken Little ran up the stone steps and tried the door. "No, it's open—he must be round somewhere. Ugh, but it's dark in here."

"I should say so," said Katy, "do you suppose we can find the room?"

"Pshaw, that's easy, I could find it with my eyes shut. And I left my bag on my desk."

It was dark—so dark that they had to feel their way. They kept close together and groped along the balustrade.

"I hear a noise upstairs. Goody, I guess the janitor is up there."

Katy's tone sounded decidedly relieved. She always stoutly maintained that she was not afraid of the dark. But the dark of her own surroundings at home and this echoing cavern of blackness were very different. The sound of their own footsteps seemed to pursue them along the corridor.

When they reached the top floor they caught the welcome gleam of light under the door of Miss Burch's room.

"The janitor must be in there—wonder what he's doing? He usually cleans the top floor first." Jane was relieved at the prospect of a light and the reassuring presence of old Mr. Jones.

"Bet he gives us fits," said Katy. "He's as cross as ex if you bother him."

"Well, I'm going to have my books if he does scold." Chicken Little marched resolutely toward the streak of light.

But their steps had scarcely begun to sound on the upper floor till there was a roar from the imprisoned boys, followed by a staccato of fists on the oak panelling.

The girls stopped short in amazement.

"What do you suppose?" Chicken Little and Gertie clutched each other.

Katy didn't suppose. She, too, was petrified with astonishment and vague fear.

"Well, we might as well find out what it is—I've got to have my books!" Chicken Little moved resolutely forward.

Gertie hung back. "You don't suppose they could have locked a crazy man up there, do you?"

Katy had been listening intently. She thought she detected something familiar in the uproar.

"Pooh, it's just boys! What mischief do you suppose they have been up to now? Come on, let's peep through the keyhole."

"Oh, maybe it's some kind of initiation! Wouldn't it be fun if we could catch them at it?" Chicken Little began to scent adventure.

The three girls tip-toed to the door. The occupants of the room were making so much noise they could not have heard them if they had stamped their way.

Katy applied her eye cautiously to the key hole. As the five lads were massed directly against the door, she could not see much. But she recognized one of the boy's voices.

"That's Jim Click! What on earth are they up to?"

The bedlam within resolved itself into an intelligible demand:

"Let us out!—Let us out!"

"My goodness!" said Jane, "they must be locked in!"

"Shall we answer?"

Katy shrieked a shrill reply to the boys.

"What's the matter?"

The commotion within ceased abruptly. They heard someone exclaim: "It isn't the janitor—it's a girl!"

There was an instant's whispered consultation, then Jim Click's voice said politely: "We got locked in here accidentally—the key's on the floor there near the door somewhere."

Chicken Little began to fumble round in the darkness. She soon found it. The lads had evidently poked it out of the keyhole in their efforts to force the lock.

Katy was curious. She thought it would do no harm to parley with the prisoners a moment.

"How did you get locked in?" she demanded.

The boys were not anxious to take anybody into their confidence about the hazing—especially a girl—or girls. They had discovered there was more than one.

"Oh, we were just fooling!" one of the lads called back evasively. "Hurry up and let us out—that's a good girl!"

Katy persisted. She wished to get to the bottom of this interesting predicament.

"I don't see how you could lock yourselves in, if you were fooling."

"Never mind how we got in—let us out—can't you?"

Chicken Little decided to take a hand.

"Won't let you out till you tell us."

"There isn't anything to tell—one of our crowd did it and skipped for a joke, see, silly?" The lads were growing impatient.

"Bet you're fibbing or else——" Katy had an inspiration. "Was it the sophomores?" She knew the rivalry was intense between her own class and the freshies, and Jim Click was a freshman. That must be the answer.

But the boys had been trying to recognize the girls by their voices; they might be sophomore girls sent to guy them.

"Is that Katy Halford?" Jim Click demanded suddenly.

"For me to know and you to find out," she retorted pertly.

"I bet the sophs locked them in!" she said in a whisper to the other girls.

Chicken Little was doing some thinking. She was a freshman in rank though she had some sophomore studies. Gertie was a regular freshman.

Katy had a wicked idea. "Let's take the key and send someone to let them out after supper."

Chicken Little demurred. "But I want my books."

"Well," said Katy, "if the sophs did it—I don't want to be the one to let them out—that would be going back on my class."

"You needn't," said Jane, "I'll let them out myself—I'm a freshman."

She tried to insert the key in the lock, but Katy grabbed her.

"No, you don't, Jane Morton!"

Her exclamation gave the boys the information they were after.

"It's Katy and Gertie Halford and Chicken Little Morton!" one lad exclaimed.

Katy and Chicken Little were pretty evenly matched in strength though Jane was the taller. But Katy found it easy to keep her from putting the key in the keyhole, if she couldn't get it away.

"Gertie—help me—you're a freshman—Gertie, come on!"

The boys heard and encouraged from the other side of the door.

"Yes, Gertie, be a brick and help us out!"

"Gertie Halford, if you go back on me, I'll never speak to you again to the longest day I live!" Katy was angry.

Gertie was always gentle but she had plenty of courage and she could never stand to be threatened.

She had been hesitating which side to join, but Katy's words decided her.

"I can't go back on my class you know, Katy," she said mischievously, flinging herself on her sister. "I'll try to hold her while you open the door, Jane."

The boys listened breathlessly to the squabble and sounds of conflict. It was of brief duration. The two girls dragged Katy from the neighborhood of the door and Gertie struggled with her, while Chicken Little sped back and triumphantly inserted the key. The door burst open and she almost fell over the boys from the impetus of her shove.

The boys had lightened their discomfort by turning on the gas and the brightness made her blink for an instant. The lads set up a cheer.

"Good for you, Chicken Little, you and Gertie are trumps!"

Katy and Gertie had stopped scuffling the instant the door opened and followed Jane into the room.

Katy was not warmly received—the lads eyed her hostilely.

"So you were going to keep us, were you?" Jim Click advanced a step rather menacingly. "I have a good mind to lock you in here and see if you think it is so much fun."

Jim hadn't got the words out of his mouth till he faced a young fury. Jane sprang between him and

Katy with fire in her eyes. "Don't you dare, Jim Click!"

The boy eyed her defiantly for an instant, then laughed. "Guess it wouldn't be quite fair to you and Gertie, Chicken Little. You are regular bricks—both of you—we shan't forget it—see if we do!"

Order restored, Jane remembered her errand. She started up the aisle toward her desk when her eyes were caught by the peculiar appearance of one of the lads. Lucy's sash was wound around his person as many times as it would go and tied in a hard knot at the end. The gorgeous ribbon was in ridiculous contrast to his dark woolen suit.

Jane stood staring one moment, then scolded indignantly.

"Why, you've been in my school bag!—I think that's real mean—and oh dear, you've just ruined that sash—I ought to have taken it to Mrs. Barr right away. What will she say?" Chicken Little's distress was very genuine.

The offending boy was instantly penitent. He began untying the knot gingerly. Jane jumped forward and stopped him.

"Don't!—don't, your hands are dirty—I'll untie it!"

She carefully undid the knot and unwound the sash cautiously. The others watched her smooth it out, and examine it anxiously.

"Is it sure enough spoiled?" asked the offender.

"I guess it isn't dirty—and maybe it'll press out," conceded Chicken Little grudgingly. "Where's the rest of my things?"

The boys flew to gather up her scattered belongings.

"We ate the apple!" Jim Click acknowledged. "Sorry, Jane—I'll bring you a beauty tomorrow—if you'll forgive us."

The lads were anxious to make amends. They escorted the girls home in a body and assured Jane that if the sash was spoiled, they would club together and buy a new one.

Alice inspected the sash and decided that the pressing would restore it. It was arranged that Chicken Little should take it to Mrs. Barr the next afternoon after school.

She had been secretly hoping that Alice would offer to go with her. She had not been able even to persuade Katy or Gertie to accompany her. Katy had a music lesson and Gertie was to go downtown with her mother to get a new winter coat. Jane spent the time required to walk the four blocks from the schoolhouse to the Barr home in studying up what she should say to Mrs. Barr. She felt very guilty that she had neglected it so long.

Mrs. Barr was at home. She was a rather severe-

looking person with a quick decided way of speaking, that took the words out of other people's mouths.

"You wanted to see me, did you? Well, I was awfully sorry I didn't get to see your Ma when she was here. But it was just in the grape season, and I was too busy with my jell to go any place."

Chicken Little awkwardly tendered the sash.

"You wanted to bring me this sash—Lucy—I don't understand. This isn't Lucy's sash."

Chicken Little patiently explained the exact circumstances including the incident of the lad's taking it out of her school bag.

But Mrs. Barr was still mystified.

"You say Lucy brought this to you for a present. Whv, where on earth did the child get it?"

Mrs. Barr unrolled the handsome brocade ribbon thoughtfully.

"Why, this is the one that was in Hovey's window so long—why, it must have cost several dollars! The idea!" She got up unceremoniously and hurried into the hall. "Lucy! Lu-cy!" she called peremptorily from the foot of the stairs.

It was some moments before she received a response.

"Come down here, Mother wants you."

Lucy came laggingly down the stairs and into the parlor. She seemed startled on seeing Chicken

Little. Her expression changed from surprise to fear when she saw the sash lying on the table beside her mother. She looked from her mother to Chicken Little and back to her mother.

"Where did you get this sash, Lucy?"

Lucy moistened her lips with her tongue but did not reply.

"Come, tell me, Mother wants to know."

Lucy hung her head but still did not answer.

Mrs. Barr's face was growing stern.

"Did you hear me, where did you get this sash?"

Lucy looked appealingly at Jane. But Jane was powerless to help her. She was sorry for the child and wished herself a thousand miles away.

Mrs. Barr was growing angry. "Come, you must tell me!"

"I—I bought—it," came falteringly from Lucy.

"Bought it! Where did you get the money?"

Lucy said she didn't know.

But a sudden idea had popped into Chicken Little's head.

"Oh, Mrs. Barr—maybe it was Lucy took the money instead of Pat!" This was naturally not a popular suggestion with Mrs. Barr.

"Nonsense, the child had no chance to steal it from the store!—Unless——" An unpleasant thought was forcing itself upon her. She turned again to Lucy.

"Come here to Mother." She put her hand under Lucy's chin and looked her squarely in the eyes. "Where did you get the money to buy this sash? Did you take it out of your bank?"

"Yes," whined Lucy, "I took it out of my bank."

"You see," said Mrs. Barr, "I knew the child wouldn't steal." Her manner was decidedly abrupt and chilly.

But Chicken Little had entirely forgotten her embarrassment in her eager desire to clear Pat.

"But maybe, Mrs. Barr, she wouldn't think it was stealing to take it from her father's store."

"I tell you the idea is absurd!" Mrs. Barr rose with an evident desire to speed this parting guest. "I am much obliged to you for returning the sash, Jane. But I shall be very indignant if you hint such a suspicion about Lucy to anyone else. I want you to promise me you won't say a word about it to a single person." Mrs. Barr took a step toward Jane with a manner that was almost menacing.

Jane felt very small and insignificant but she was not cowed. Instead of replying to Mrs. Barr, she whirled toward Lucy.

"Lucy, didn't you get that money out of the drawer in your father's store?"

Lucy edged away from her mother toward Jane. Mrs. Barr was too astonished to interfere for a moment. Perceiving that her mother was not going

to do anything, Lucy ran to Jane and flung her arms around her neck as she bent toward her.

"Yes," she whispered in Jane's ear. "I took it—because—because—I wanted to buy you somethin'." The child burst into tears. Jane hugged her for a moment, but Mrs. Barr was thoroughly incensed. She unclasped Lucy's clinging arms and sent her out of the room.

"This is perfect nonsense!" she said. "The child doesn't know what she is talking about. She has taken a fancy to you evidently and she would say anything to please you. I insist that you do not mention this to anyone."

Jane's blood was up. "I am going right straight and tell Dr. Gridley—he has a right to know—and so has Pat!"

Without waiting for a reply, Chicken Little darted past Mrs. Barr into the hall and out the front door. Not till she was out into the street did she stop running. Then she walked very slowly for a block to restore her composure. She was very much ashamed of running away in this undignified fashion. "I always spoil everything!" she mourned. "She couldn't have done anything to me but scold."

But Chicken Little did not think of herself long. This was too big a discovery. After a few moments' deliberating she decided to go straight down to Dick's office and tell him first. Maybe there was

something that ought to be done right away to keep Mrs Barr from trying to deny it.

Dick whistled when she told her story. "I think we'll step right over and lay this matter before Mr. Barr. He is a fair-minded man. I believe he will be glad it was only a child's fault instead of poor Pat's being a thief."

Dick was right. Mr. Barr listened attentively to Jane's story. He asked her a number of questions, then twirled his watch-chain thoughtfully for several minutes.

At length he said with a sigh. "Yes. I think this clears Pat. I have been in the habit of bringing the child down with me Saturday evenings for an hour or two in the store. She enjoys running around and I am so busy, I see little of her. And as you say, Jane, she wouldn't think it very wrong, perhaps, to take the money when it was mine. Though she knew better—I mustn't be making excuses for her—she knew better." Mr. Barr sighed again. "I'm glad though she took it for somebody else—not for herself. You say she's been bringing you candy and little things for sometime. That explains the candy store bill. Well, well—how easy it is to be deceived! Thank you for coming—I'll clear up things for the lad at once. Will you go with me over to the doctor's?"

Pat was almost as stunned by this sudden vindi-

cation as he had been by the unexpected accusation. He looked from one to the other in so dazed a manner that Dick took pity on him.

"Chicken Little, you'd better go say 'how-do-you-do' to Peter Parrot while we are here. Pat will escort you."

Pat found his tongue when they were out of sight of the elders.

"I can't ever be after thanking you!" he said, flushing a little. "You and the Hardings and Dr. Gridley and Katy and Gertie and the boys on the nine. I'll never forget—I didn't know what it was to have friends before. And I'll never let you be sorry you stood by me—I'll promise you that. But it's proud I am that it was you, Chicken Little, who cleared me. I—I——" The blue Irish eyes beneath their black lashes were looking at her so tenderly that Jane felt suddenly confused, she scarcely knew why.

She held out a finger to the parrot to relieve her embarrassment.

Peter evidently did not share Pat's gratitude. He promptly nipped at the friendly finger. "Go off and die!" he croaked morosely.

Jane took only part of his advice. She went home.



CHAPTER XIV JANE MAKES A DECISION

THE winter had gone by rapidly for Chicken Little. Sometimes she missed the home folk sadly, and longed to cuddle Jilly or creep into her father's arms for a good big hug, but for the most part she was too busy with each day's doings to think very much about home. And Alice and Dick were both so kind and understanding when things did go criss-cross, she couldn't have been really homesick if she tried. Alice explained that it was because this was her home, too.

Both Dr. and Mrs. Morton were pleased with her progress in her studies and with Alice's accounts of her. Alice wrote almost oftener than Jane, to Mrs. Morton. She knew how hungry the mother would be for every scrap of news about her baby. "Though I really believe Mrs. Morton worries more about Ernest than she does about Jane," she told Dick.

"Ernest understands his mother better than Jane does. That's a fine streak in the boy—his tenderness for his mother. Don't wonder she idolizes him."

"I hope the Academy won't have the same effect on him that it seems to have on Carol—he's a bit too dandified."

"That will wear off fast enough—Carol has good stuff in him, once you learn where to look for it. But Ernest is peculiarly sensitive to his surroundings—a bit fastidious for his age—not half as democratic as Jane."

Chicken Little complained that Ernest's letters were the scrappiest things—"mostly postage stamp and address," she told him. But Ernest declared that there wasn't anything to write about at the Academy. You did the same things over and over in precisely the same way. If she wanted details he could write up a batch of letters all at once and date them different weeks—they would fit one week as well as another.

"Talk about 'every day and Sunday too,' in Centerville. High School isn't a match on the grind we have here," Ernest wrote. "It will be a little better when I get to be a second classman—speed the day! Tell me all about what you are doing, Sis. And why doesn't Katy write oftener? Strikes me your letters sound rather Pat-ish lately. It is Pat this and Pat that. Carol says he is a handsome cuss. Don't you

go to getting boy-struck, Sister mine, you are too young. And Pat isn't exactly our kind anyway."

Chicken Little and Katy talked this letter over in detail.

"I am not boy-struck," denied Chicken Little indignantly. "And I never write about Pat except when there's things to write about, like his trouble—so there! I'll thank Ernest Morton not to be thinking things that aren't so!"

"But you do like Pat." Katy delighted to probe into people's feelings.

Jane bristled at Katy's assertion. "I don't like him any more than you and Gertie do," she defended.

"You do, too, Jane Morton, I didn't feel half as bad as you did last fall. Anyhow, he likes you a lot better than he does either of us. Say, do you care for him as much as you do for Sherm?"

Chicken Little disdained a reply to this quizzing.

Katy waited. "Bet you do!"

"It's none of your business, Katy Halford. I am not always asking you whether you like Ernest better than Carol."

"I do," said Katy with an impish look in her gray eyes. "You don't have to ask me—I like Ernest better than any boy I know and Carol next."

"So do I like Ernest best," said Jane jauntily.

"And Carol next?" Katy was maddening.

Chicken Little squirmed in her chair. "You needn't ever think I could like Carol better than Sherm. Why Sherm's most like Ernest to me."

"Is Pat like Ernest to you?" Katy's thirst for truth on this delicate subject was hard to meet.

Jane hurled her algebra at her by way of reply. "Let's go down cellar and get some apples."

Late in March Ernest wrote that Sherm was coming to Annapolis for his spring vacation in April. "Gee, it will be jolly to have him here, though I don't suppose I can get much librtv. Wish you were coming too, Chicken Little. Do you think Mother and Father will let you come on for Anne Rand's wedding? The Rands were over the other day with some friends showing them about. Anne said she was counting on you. They have a scrump-tious old house in Baltimore and a lot of darky servants—you'd have a lark all right—and you could come over here. Almost two years, Sis, since I have laid eyes on you! Carol said you hadn't changed as much as Katy—said you were taller though and your eyes had more snap to 'em. But you know I'd kinder like to see for myself what you look like. Still, I don't know whether Father will think he can afford it—the blasted ranch takes so much improving. I 'most wish the folks had never gone there. It's too hard on Mother."

Chicken Little sat down and wrote home the

instant she finished this letter, pleading to be allowed to go to Anne's wedding and to see Ernest. She said she just couldn't wait another single minute to see Ernest, and he was homesick to see her—it stuck out all over his letter just as plain. And perhaps, she never would have such an opportunity as this invitation to the Rand's. Ernest said it was a beautiful home. She could learn a lot visiting in a place like that. She ended by assuring her father she should cry her eyes out if she didn't get to go.

She told Katy and Gertie what she had written, but not Alice. Some way she had the feeling that Alice would not see the trip so urgently as she did. Katy said her mother said, that Dr. and Mrs. Morton would never in the world let Jane go so far without her mother. This was not comforting.

Jane fairly haunted the post-office for the next few days. Her fidgeting made Dick curious.

"What ails you, Chicken Little, expecting Uncle Sam to send you a fortune by mail?"

Jane replied demurely that she hoped for a letter from home.

"But you always get letters from home twice a week; what's the rush?—busted? I think we could come to the rescue temporarily." He pulled out a handful of small coins and a five-dollar bill. "How much?"

"No," said Jane, "it isn't money—I have over

two dollars left and Father always sends me more on the first of the month. I just want to know if I can go to Anne Rand's wedding—and Annapolis."

"Sure your head's screwed on tight, Jane? It might turn it to have all that gayety 'to onct.'" Dick looked a little thoughtful.

"Do you suppose they will let her go?" he asked Alice later.

"Hardly know—of course, it is a wonderful opportunity in a way, but Jane's pretty young for that sort of thing." Alice also looked thoughtful.

"Well, if she were my child, I wouldn't let her go." Dick shut his lips firmly.

"Don't say that to Chicken Little, or you won't be popular," replied Alice. "To tell the truth, I don't believe I would either. Things come so easy for her she doesn't half realize that they cost somebody else work and sacrifice. And she has plenty of time for that sort of thing after she is actually grown-up."

"You forget," said Dick impressively, "that Chicken Little is now fifteen!"

"And tall for her age," Alice added with a smile. "However, husband dear, it is very easy to decide what is good for other people's children. Possibly we would better let the Mortons have some say in the matter."

"Far be it from me to meddle," said Dick.

When the much-desired letter came it was too indefinite to be very satisfactory. Mrs. Morton wrote that she had received no formal invitation from Anne Rand, and it would be time enough to consider the matter if one came. In the meantime, Jane must keep her mind on her studies and not be building air-castles which might have no foundation.

Dr. Morton wrote that she would better not be getting her head set on such a trip, for he did not quite see how he could manage it.

Chicken Little retired to her bedroom and wept. Katy and Gertie found her there and did their best to comfort her.

"They didn't either of them say out and out, you couldn't," urged Katy, "and it isn't worth while to be crying till you're sure."

"And you'd miss Commencement here maybe, if you did go. And we 'most always have a lot of fun at Commencement," soothed Gertie.

"But I just know they aren't going to let me—and I would have a lovely bridesmaid's dress—and everything," mourned Jane, feeling more and more injured as she painted this alluring picture.

"Maybe it's because you would have to have things, you can't go," replied Katy, always practical.

Jane did not seem to find this consoling. Katy tried again.

"You wouldn't be here to see Pat graduate."

"I don't give a fig if I don't see him—I guess you needn't think that, Katy Halford."

"Well, you don't need to get so mad about it! I didn't say you were gone on him. And I should think you would want to see your friends graduate, whether they are boys or not," Katy was virtuous and irritating.

"I guess if you hadn't seen your brother for almost two years, you'd want that worse than to see anybody get up and read an old dry essay. I hate essays!"

"Mother says you are awful young to be a bridesmaid." Katy decided to take a new tack.

"It's nobody's business if I am, if Miss Rand wants me!"

"Guess it is your mother's business," said Katy airily.

Chicken Little sat up indignantly. "You are just trying to be hateful! I guess if it was you—you wouldn't talk that way. Come on, Gertie, let's study our English, it's warmer down in the sitting-room."

The next two weeks went by uneventfully. But midway in April came a long letter from Sherm to Jane, telling all about his visit to Ernest. Sherm had not taken the trouble to do much writing after the first few weeks. He had started out bravely with lengthy descriptions of everything at New Haven, from the elms to the boys he met. But Sherm found

he had to buckle down to study. Books seemed harder after his year on the ranch and the pleasant summer of travel. He went in for rowing while the fine weather lasted. Later, he joined a club, and his time was soon too full for him to give much thought to half-grown adopted sisters. He occasionally bethought him to ask the Captain to send one of his letters on to Jane, when he thought something would specially interest her. He also took to sending her messages through the Captain. These last often reached her by way of her mother or Marian, for Captain Clarke was not much of a letter-writer either.

Jane was indignant at this neglect at first. Afterwards, she was rather thankful, for she had to write home regularly—and the days did go by so fast. But this letter of Sherm's was as long and newsy as the most exacting young person could expect. Sherm seemed entirely oblivious of any of his shortcomings in the past, and chatted gayly of what Ernest was doing, and of the good times they would have on Big John the coming summer.

He, too, had seen Anne Rand, and she had reiterated her wish to have Jane come to the wedding. She was only waiting to fix the day before writing to Mrs. Morton.

"You'll have the time of your life, Jane. They are going to be married in church with all the frills.

Bet Martin will be glad when it's over. Oh, yes, they are going to have Ernest for one of the ushers, if he can come."

Chicken Little sat down and coaxed her prettiest in a long letter to Dr. Morton. She was sure her beloved father would not deny her when he knew how badly she wanted to go. He simply couldn't!!!

"It's a shame to have to study such glorious weather!" declared Katy.

The High School teachers were firmly convinced that there was not much studying done that first week of May. If the girls and boys were not staring dreamily out the windows, they seemed to be sunning themselves on the schoolhouse steps or dawdling in pairs and groups to and from school.

Old Bates was exasperated. "If it isn't spring fever, it's pure impishness. I'd rather teach the rest of the year than the first warm week in spring."

Chicken Little was not a victim of any of the complaints mentioned, but her thoughts were quite as far away from such commonplace things as algebra and Latin as if she had been. She was either picturing her stern parents melting under her pleadings to go to Baltimore, or having beauteous visions of herself in pale pink mull and a leghorn hat trimmed with pink roses, the center of large and admiring groups of midshipmen and other less fascinating beholders. Not that Jane considered herself beauteous

ordinarily—but she had great faith in the transforming effect of the pink mull and the leghorn.

Anne Rand had written to Mrs. Morton at last. She had suggested that the wedding was to be simple. She wished to have her own young sister and Chicken Little for bridesmaids in pink and blue summer frocks. She assured Mrs. Morton that there need be no late hours, unless Jane went to a hop at the Naval Academy, for the wedding was to be in the old church at high noon with a breakfast for the family and intimate friends immediately after. She said she and Mr. Martin were coming west immediately. But her mother wanted Jane to visit her sister for a fortnight to see the sights of Baltimore and of Washington also, if Mrs. Morton approved. She would also be glad to chaperone the child over to Annapolis for a few days, stay near her brother.

Miss Rand was most tactful. It sounded very attractive and not too young-ladyfied. Both Dr. and Mrs. Morton were tempted by the prospect. It was discussed for several days pro and con at the ranch, while Chicken Little fussed and dreamed and watched the mails impatiently at Centerville.

“They are delightful well-bred people. It would be a genuine object lesson in good breeding to Jane, which the child needs—she is far too careless. I wish we could send her—but—the pink mull and the

leghorn sound simple but they will be expensive—and railroad fare and hotel bills—dear me!” Mrs. Morton sighed.

“It is all very delightful, Mother, but I don’t know. The corn-crib must have a new roof right away. And you are wanting the sitting-room papered! I can’t see my way to do it all. The chicken-biddy’s young enough to wait for some things—she’s had a good year. Still, I do hate to have the baby disappointed.

Dr. Morton picked up Jane’s last letter and carefully re-read it. He laid it down with a sigh.

Mrs. Morton busied herself with her sewing. She did not reply for several minutes. “I am afraid Ernest will be disappointed, too,” she remarked finally.

“Ernest is old enough to understand about money matters,” said Dr. Morton decidedly, “but Jane—I suppose she thinks the skies will fall if she doesn’t go—her letters sound that way.”

“Well, I think Ernest should be considered, too. He has been away almost two years—and it has been hard for the boy. Ernest doesn’t say much but I was there, you remember—I think the authorities are much more severe than there is any necessity for!” Mrs. Morton gave her sewing a little emphatic jerk.

Dr. Morton rose to his feet impatiently.

"They can't very well baby the lads, if they expect to make soldiers out of them," he replied. "But I must go and look after those calves. We'll think the matter over further before we decide. How much do you think her clothes would come to, Mother?"

Mrs. Morton calculated for a moment. "I hardly know—I'll talk it over with Marian. She's good at that sort of thing."

So Chicken Little waited and assured herself and Katy and Gertie and Dick and Alice almost hourly that she simply couldn't stand it if she didn't get to go. In the meantime she was finding life very interesting. She loved the balmy spring days and she enjoyed every minute of High School—even when she grumbled the loudest. She had a real joy in having a good recitation or composition, for Chicken Little liked to excel. And the little encounters in the halls with—you never knew whom it would be—were an enchanting series of surprises. One day it was May Halford with a scheme to hang maybaskets, another, Pat brought her a bunch of pink anemones from the woods. Possibly it was only one of the girls with a "trade last." But Jane found it all specially delightful after her quiet years on the ranch.

Pat reproached himself because he was secretly hoping that Jane might be there for his graduation.

It was a big moment to the lad. With Mother and Maggie gone, there were so few to understand and rejoice with him over that bit of sheepskin which had cost him much hard work and many sacrifices. And Jane had said to him one day in the hall with a sudden comprehension of all he had been through: "Pat, I think they ought to put a blue ribbon or something extra on your diploma, because you have had to work so hard to get through school. I'd be awful proud if I were you."

Pat was proud, so proud and pleased he could not seem to find words to express his feelings. And Jane was perfectly aware she had given him pleasure. "Isn't it funny?" she said to Katy, "When you want people to like you, lots of times they don't, but if you aren't bothering much about it, they do."

"What is the matter now?" demanded Katy.

"Oh, nothing—I was just a thinking."

When Dr. Morton had thought the matter over for three days, he came to a decision that was no decision at all. He resolved to lay the exact facts of the family finances before Chicken Little, and permit her to decide for herself whether she thought she ought to go.

Mrs. Morton protested. "The child has no judgment—it is not good for her to get the notion that she is capable of deciding important questions for herself. She is headstrong enough now."

"She is so headstrong," said Dr. Morton, "that she needs to develop rare common-sense to balance it. I intend to try her out."

Chicken Little opened the fateful letter from Father with fingers that were fairly trembling with eagerness. Alice was with her and watched her. She was curious to hear the family decision herself. As she read the first lines, Jane looked puzzled, then her face suddenly lighted, farther on she grew very sober. She turned the last sheet, read to the end, then went back to the beginning, and read it all over again.

"I am expiring with curiosity," suggested Alice.

"Oh!" Jane had forgotten that Alice was there.

"Well," said Alice, "can you go?"

"I, yes, I guess so—oh, I don't know. You can read it if you want to."

Chicken Little thrust the sheets of note-paper into her hand.

Dr. Morton began by saying there was a great deal to be said for and against going. He went over carefully all the arguments Jane had urged in its favor, and added several more she had not thought of, then he told her of the things that were needed at home which must be given up, if she made the trip.

"Your mother and I," he continued, "are entirely willing to make these sacrifices for your best good.

We are inclined to think the opportunities you would have in observing such a beautifully ordered home as the Rand's and the educational value of the travel and sightseeing, would open your eyes to a great many things you have not understood—things your mother has been trying to teach you about the manner and speech and thoughts of a lady. We are willing to give up a good deal to offer you this opportunity. But we are afraid, what you are thinking of, little girl, is simply and solely the good time and the pretty new clothes. We want you to decide this question entirely by yourself. Do not consult anyone. And think it out for a day or two before you write—impulsive decisions don't amount to much—they are just moods. God bless you, little daughter, the ranch is mighty lonesome without you."

Alice handed the letter back without comment. She meant to be very careful, indeed, not to influence Chicken Little's decision. Dr. Morton wanted to know what Jane thought, not what she and Dick and Katy and Gertie and Mrs. Halford thought. She cautioned Jane a little later about this.

"I wouldn't talk it over with anyone till after you have decided, dear, because you are bound to be influenced, if you do. Your father evidently wants you to think this out all by yourself."

Chicken Little looked at her rather wistfully. She

felt a little as if she had been cast off on a desert island.

She simply could not study for the next three days. Every time she looked at an algebra problem she saw her father's letter on the page instead of neatly arranged signs and figures. Visions of going home, angelic but disappointed, mingled with other visions of the pink mull and the wedding march when she tried to get her lesson. She decided at night that she would be an ungrateful and selfish child if she insisted upon going. But by morning she had satisfied herself that Father really wished her to go—he merely wanted her to make the most of her opportunities.

Katy did not know she had heard from home. She set Jane's absent-mindedness down to the suspense of waiting. But she was growing impatient with her.

"I don't see what you have to be so plaguey cranky for! You won't be killed if you don't get to go. Gertie and I aren't going any place, and you'll have a lovely trip home—and Ernest is coming in September—I don't see why you need to fuss so!"

Some way Katy's outburst cleared the air a trifle. She did have more done for her than most of the girls she knew. And she would surely go to Annapolis some

day—if she did not go now—and the Rands might invite her again, even if there wasn't any wedding. The sitting-room ought to be papered. Her mother had wanted it done last year, she remembered. The common-sense that Dr. Morton had hoped for was wrestling valiantly with the intense little demon that must have its own way regardless.

The third day she hurried home from school in the afternoon and wrote to her father that she thought Mother needed new sitting-room paper and the corn-crib needed a new roof, much worse than she needed to go to Baltimore and Annapolis. She said that if she couldn't learn to be a lady from her Mother and Alice and Marian, she guessed she wouldn't learn it from the Rands. It was a very brief letter, and ended rather lamely with her being glad Father could trust her.

Alice, as it happened, wrote the same day to both Dr. and Mrs. Morton. She assured them that whatever Jane's decision was, she had followed instructions and made it alone. She had quizzed Mrs. Halford and the girls, and found Chicken Little had not confided in them. "She has been thinking it over very soberly. I have never known her so quiet. And I suspect there have been copious tears—her pillow-cases have that appearance."

Jane was not the only one to shed tears. Mrs. Morton wept openly when she read Jane's letter.

"Oh, Father, let's tell her to go—I don't mind waiting another year for the sitting-room."

Dr. Morton had to wipe his glasses, but he insisted he had something in his eye. He did not reply to his wife's suggestion until the following morning. Then he sat down and wrote to Jane again. He handed the letter to Mrs. Morton. "I think this is about right, Mother."

"Won't that be too much responsibility for the child?" Mrs. Morton looked doubtful.

"It won't hurt her a mite, and if she agrees to do it, you must let her do it."

Jane had had a virtuous feeling that was almost as good as being happy after she sent her letter off. She told Alice with no little pride of her renunciation. She told Katy and Gertie and Pat and Miss Burch. She tried to be very sweet and modest, but self-satisfaction was fast obscuring her disappointment in giving up the trip. Katy and Gertie were quite overcome by her noble sacrifice. Katy said she bet her father would make it up to her some way. Jane in her secret heart felt that this would be most fitting.

Dick Harding watched her with growing amusement.

"I wish Chicken Little didn't take her goodness so hard," he said to Alice.

"Why, she has to have something pleasant to

think about after giving up that wonderful prospect. She really was mighty plucky, Dick."

Just as Jane had fully settled down to the daily routine again, her father's second letter arrived.

She gasped when she reached the second page. He was proud of her, he said. He took a full page to tell her this, then he went on to say that he had thought of a plan that might make it possible for her to go without really depriving them at home. There was an unusually good market for butter this season. And neither Mother nor Marian were strong enough to make butter to sell, with their other cares. If Chicken Little was willing to undertake all the hard work and care that handling the milk and cream would involve, she could easily make during the summer more than half what her trip would cost. Mother would give up the sitting-room paper and she must turn in her butter money for the corn-crib roof in September. She was to write at once and let him know. Mother had not yet replied to Anne Rand's letter. Dr. Morton added one last warning in a postscript. "To do this will take several hours' work each day. If you undertake it, I shall expect you to carry it through the whole summer, successfully. The crib roof must be replaced before the corn is gathered in the fall. I do not want to have to borrow the money at the bank."

Chicken Little did not take any time to consider

this offer. She accepted it promptly and joyously, and would not listen to any discouraging comments from others.

"I guess I have churned lots of times and I know what I have to do."

"But it's harder to churn a whole lot of cream than just a little bit for the family," insisted Katy who remembered several occasions when she had helped work the churn-dasher during her visit to the ranch.

"Pooh, I can do it all down in the spring house and it will be lovely and cool there—and I just love to see the butter come! And I am to tend to it all by myself—Father said so. I am going to see if I can't make better butter than old Mrs. Swan. And they say she gets two cents a pound more than anyone else at the Garland stores, because it is always gilt-edged. Oh, I can't wait to begin."

Dick whistled when he heard the new turn of affairs. "Your father is a wise gentleman, Jane. If you get spoiled during your visit, three months of butter-making will tone you up wonderfully."

The next two weeks passed like a dream. Anne Rand was to be married the first day of June. Chicken Little would have to leave the twenty-eighth of May. And the twenty-ninth was Commencement Day at the High School.

Mrs. Morton had entrusted to Alice the prepara-

tions for the visit. She could get a better dress-maker in Centerville and the time was short.

Besides, the pink mull, Jane was to have a new lawn and a brown linen traveling dress.

"She will have to be content with simple summery things," Mrs. Morton wrote.

"It is plenty," said Alice, "with your gingham. And your summer silk is as good as new. Aren't you glad I wouldn't let you wear it very often?" There had been many painful arguments over the cherished silk. Chicken Little agreed with surprising meekness. She was so good these days that Dick Harding declared she was positively syrupy. He threatened to pinch her to see if it were more than skin deep.

But except for a few momentary lapses, Jane maintained her extraordinary virtue until the twenty-eighth.

"You'd bust, if you tried to be so sweet much longer," observed Katy bluntly.

Jane even neglected this golden opportunity to answer back. Was she not going to have the most perfectly wonderful time a fifteen-year-old girl ever had? She looked down pitifully on Katy and Gertie, who had only the High School Commencement to look forward to.

Down in her heart she did rather hate to miss this Commencement herself. The very last thing she

did on the day of her departure was to pick a great cluster of pink garden roses and arrange them in an imposing bouquet with feathery asparagus and syringa blossoms interspersed. This done, she put it in water in the darkest corner of the cellar, and made Katy promise solemnly that she would not forget to tie the card on and toss the flowers to Pat, after he read his essay the following morning.

But Katy was very busy the next morning helping decorate the stage for the exercises. And it was Gertie who remembered the flowers and did her best to land them at Pat's feet, as he made his stiff bow to the audience before taking his seat.

The flowers fell short and dropped into somebody's lap on the front row. But they were soon passed up to the lad along with many other friendly fragrant tokens.

There was not much on the card. Jane had meant to write something very elegant and appropriate, but she was in too big a hurry to think of anything. So she wrote "Patrick Casey" on one side, "From your friend, Jane Morton," on the other.

At the instant Pat read the card, his "friend Jane" was nearing Baltimore feeling very demure and young ladyfied, but considerably worried as to whether she should kiss Mrs. Rand, or just offer to shake hands.



CHAPTER XV

THE ADVENTURES OF THE PINK MULL

CHICKEN LITTLE set one foot before the other fearfully, with her gaze fixed firmly on Ernest and Carol walking slowly just ahead with very straight shoulders and heads well up, as became officers-to-be in the United States Navy. It was easier to forget the staring eyes about her with Ernest there. She had not dreamed it would be so hard to take those few steps from the church door to the chancel, but it seemed miles. The old church was dim in spite of the sunshine streaming in through the stained glass of the windows. The light fell on the blue uniforms ahead in grotesque patches of violet and red and green. Ernest's sleek brown head caught a violet beam that glanced off Carol's shoulder, while Carol's close-cropped blonde pate was touched with a ruddy glow.

She wondered for an instant what the light would

do to her own pink dress and to Mary Rand's blue one. She could hear Mary's breath coming quick beside her. Then she wondered about Anne Rand. What was she thinking about, going up to be married in two or three minutes more? Jane glanced ahead to the chancel steps and saw that Mr. Martin was already there with his best man. She thought he looked very white and grave for a man who was going to marry such a lovely girl as Anne Rand.

But the last few yards of aisle disappeared behind them quickly. There was one awful moment of fear lest she should not stand in exactly the right spot, then everything grew uncannily still and the minister's voice seemed to fill the place. He was so solemn and deliberate as he read the marriage service. Jane thought they were beautiful words—not a bit sad—why did he want to be so solemn about it? Her glance fell on Anne Rand's hand and arm. These trembled a little. How funny! She should think she would be just too thrilled for anything.

She glanced from her to Ernest a little beyond. Wasn't he the dearest dear of a brother? She hadn't seen him until a few moments before they left the house. He could have liberty for only half a day. The Commandant had not seemed to consider either sisters or weddings of sufficient importance to suspend any regulations in Ernest's favor.

Vinnie, the colored maid, had been buttoning her dress when she had first heard Ernest's voice in the hall below. Chicken Little had made one spring for the door regardless of consequences to dainty pearl buttons or fragile buttonholes. She flew down the stairs crying "Ernest! Ernest!" her voice rising to a joyous squeal.

Ernest heard and dashed to meet her. She jumped off the last step into his arms and clung and clung and laughed and squeezed him tight, as if she were afraid he might vanish suddenly. And the first thing she knew, her throat choked up and she was crying and patting him both at once.

"Why, little Sis—little Sis!" Ernest seemed to love the sound of the words, "you mustn't cry!" There was a little break in his own voice.

"I know—I don't mean to—but I'm—so—so—glad and—it's been so long—it didn't seem so long till I saw you!"

"Here, now, Ernest, you'll muss her dress, if you don't let go." Carol came to the rescue of her wedding finery. "Say, Chicken Little, what's the matter with saying 'Hello' to me, too? Haven't I been away?" Carol did not own a sister. He almost wished he did as he watched this reunion. It must be kind of nice to have such a pretty, bright-eyed girl as Chicken Little thinking such a lot of you. He had never seen this side of "girls" before. He supposed brothers and sisters usually quarreled.

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Jane greeted him smiling through her tears. "I am ashamed to be such a baby, but you see Ernest and I——" Her voice was a little trembly again.

"Yes, I see," said Carol, laughing. "You'd better keep off the subject, Chicken Little, or your eyes will be red for the wedding. Here, I'll fix you." Carol spun her away down the hall in a waltz before Jane realized what he was up to.

Suddenly she remembered that her dress wasn't fastened all the way, and she didn't have her sash on.

She pulled away in distress. "Oh, I forgot I——" she wondered if her dress were gaping awfully. "I must go and finish—getting ready." She did not even dare to say "dressing" lest Carol should look to see what was wrong.

She kissed her hand to the boys from the landing of the stairs.

"Oh dear, what if her dress had——" Colored Vinnie reassured her.

"No'm, I'd a most finished. You-all's going to look lak a posy with youah cheeks so pink and vouah bright eyes. You sure mus' think a heap of that brotheh."

Then had come the enchanting drive to the church with passers-by staring at the carriages curiously—a curiosity that changed to smiles as they murmured, "A wedding!" Then the church.

And now Anne Rand looked like a bit of floating white mist—all except a little pink spot that came

and went in her cheeks. Chicken Little wished she might be half as lovely, when *she* came to be a bride.

Her thoughts had strayed so she had almost forgotten where she was. The movement of the bride and groom as they started up the chancel steps toward the altar recalled her. She wondered what was coming next. She listened intently now to every word. When the ring was slipped on Anne's finger, she saw her look up and meet Mr. Martin's eyes fixed on her. He was smiling just a little, but his face was still white. Jane decided there must be something more to weddings than she quite understood.

The really merry part of this wedding was the breakfast. Nobody looked a speck solemn there. Even Anne's mother, a comfortable lady with many chins, whom her husband accused of shamelessly wiping her eyes in the very middle of the ceremony, was all smiles again.

Chicken Little set them all off by demanding seriously: "But why should anybody cry?"

"That's right, Chicken Little," said Mr. Martin, with his eyes on Anne and Martin's lovely face. "I see I have one friend. Sure enough, why should anybody cry? I consider it an occasion for unlimited rejoicing, myself."

"But, Chicken Little," said Mrs. Rand, "you see Mr. Martin is taking Anne so far away from us."

"I hadn't thought of that." Jane slipped her hand into Mrs. Rand's caressingly. "I guess Mother'll feel the same way." This personal application set them all to teasing.

"How soon, Chicken Little?"

"Not thinking of stepping off just yet, are you, Chicken Little?"

"Tell me when you are ready, Jane?" This last with an impudent grin from Carol.

Jane blushed a little and made a face at Carol. She thought afterwards she should have looked dignified and ignored him. She did wish she could do the right thing at the right moment—Anne Rand always seemed to—without stopping to think. Perhaps, perhaps—that was what Mother and Father meant when they wanted her to be a lady. She had felt very confident that she knew how to be a lady when she cared to try. But there might be a difference between having to try and just being one—whether you were thinking about it or not. Of course it was not really unlady-like to make a face at Carol. Everybody had laughed and she heard Mr. Rand whisper in rather too loud a tone: "That little girl will be a regular coquette when she grows up."

No, it wasn't exactly unlady-like—it was just childish—that was why they all laughed. Jane was firmly resolved to get over being childish.

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The week that followed the wedding was rainbow tinted—every beautiful day of it. It never rained once. It dare not with all those wonderful trips and boat rides and drives to be enjoyed—and it might be years before she came this far east again. Her mother had never been back to New York from the day she came from England, a little girl, in a sailing vessel, until she had made her visit to Ernest in the fall.

Mrs. Rand had sent Jane about with Mary and Mr. Rand to see the sights of Baltimore while she rested for a day or two after the wedding. She said weddings were strenuous for stout mothers. She was planning to take the two girls to Annapolis for two days—for June Day and Jane's much-talked-of, much-longed-for, hop.

Chicken Little went about in a radiant dream, pinching herself occasionally to be sure she was really she. She had not felt at all stiff since that first moment at the railway station when Anne had exclaimed joyously: "Here she is! Mother, Mary, this is Chicken Little!" And Mrs. Rand had given her a hearty kiss so promptly, that Chicken Little was not bothered with deciding what form of greeting was proper.

The Rands were always that way—you never did have to bother about what you ought to do. Everything was arranged so smoothly, you did the next

thing without thinking. Even at the table where they had salad forks and after-dinner coffee and lots of little frills Jane had never seen before, Mrs. Rand or Anne had made it easy for her. When she stared doubtfully at the two forks beside her plate wondering which was for pie, Anne had said quickly: "My salad forks are a prettier pattern even than Mother's, Jane. I must show them to you."

They saved her many mortifying moments in this thoughtful way. Soon Jane learned to watch the others when in doubt. She observed that Mary always stood when an older person addressed her. Mother had taught her proper respect for her elders but not this little courtesy.

The water and the shipping fascinated Jane most of all the sights of Baltimore.

"You know I never saw a really truly ship before," she explained to Mr. Rand. "But Captain Clarke has talked about them so much it seems as if I had. Do you know I've been wondering why there's so much more poetry about a ship than a railroad train. Captain Clarke fairly loved his ship. He talked about it as if it were alive. And I never heard of anybody's loving a train, did you?"

Mr. Rand agreed he never had. "What's your theory, Jane?" He had discovered even during his short acquaintance with her, that she usually had an explanation for everything she observed, tucked

away in the back of her brain. It amused him to hear her talk.

"Why, I don't know unless the sea has something to do with it. You never get tired of watching the bay here, and Mary says the real ocean is lots more wonderful—I'd love to see some of the towering big waves she tells about. I guess I won't have a chance to this time—the biggest ones 'most always come in winter anyway, don't they?"

"Yes," said Mr. Rand, "but why is the sea any more romantic or poetic than the land with its prairies and mountains and rivers?"

Jane was stumped for the moment. She considered while she bored one heel deeper into the sand and stared thoughtfully off at a big ocean freighter that was being treated to a new coat of paint preparatory to setting off on another voyage.

"Why, there is a lot of poetry about them, too, the 'eternal hills' and Tennyson's 'Brook' and 'Blow, Bugle Blow' and 'Snow Bound' and——"

"Good, I see you read, young lady. But there is something sort of extra special about the sea that chains our fancy. What is it?"

"I believe it seems that way to me because I don't know so much about it. After you've seen them a few times you know all there is about prairies and rivers—but the sea is so big—and so different, different times—maybe that's the reason—the bigness and the mystery."

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"When you come back from Annapolis," said Mr. Rand, "we will try to have a sail down the bay and have a look at this mystery."

"I'd love to—Captain Clarke will be disappointed if I don't see the ocean while I am here."

.

Ernest and Carol had been obliged to take the local train straight back to Crabtown, as they always dubbed Annapolis, the evening of the wedding day. Chicken Little really had had no opportunity to visit with Ernest at all. But she looked at him a great deal. He was slightly taller—perhaps he only looked taller because he stood straighter. Possibly he was a trifle heavier. But there was a bigger difference in his appearance than these little changes could account for.

He was nineteen now. The rebellious lock of hair he used to be forever twisting, lay docilely flat at last without coaxing. Chicken Little observed that he seemed much more at his ease with grown people than of old. He had a little deferential way that was entirely new. Ernest had been learning—so much was plain. She found it hard to wait for the good long talk she needed, to get acquainted with this new Ernest.

They went down to Annapolis in the early morning. The boys could not get away to meet them, but Ernest had engaged rooms in the old red-brick

hotel and they went directly there. They were to see the lads first at the dinner formation in front of the main building on the Academy grounds.

Chicken Little found Annapolis endlessly fascinating with its quaint old red-brick houses, its trio of circles with the state house and governor's mansion and old St. Anne's in their centers.

"I feel exactly as if I had stepped into a story book!" She stopped short before the old church and stared about the tree-bordered circle in delight. "I didn't know there was anything so delightfully old and romantic-looking in America."

"It *is* charming, isn't it?" Mrs. Rand replied. "Annapolis always reminds me of The Hague—its trees and red-brick houses and lovely Colonial doorways."

"Anne should have been married in St. Anne's," said Mary.

"Anne is halfway out to Kansas now," sighed her mother.

Chicken Little was not thinking of Anne. "Oh, I just love it all!" She gave a little skip of delight. "I really shouldn't much mind if I didn't go to the hop now—I've seen so much and you've all been so good to me—and I'm going to have Ernest all afternoon!"

Chicken Little was not going to the hop as Carol's guest. Ernest claimed his sister for himself.

"You are too young, anyhow, Sis, for that." For the first time that year Chicken Little did not mind being "too young." She was going to the hop anyway. And Carol had asked her for two dances. And the boys had her program and Mary's filled full already with names.

Chicken Little opened her eyes wide at this. "But when they haven't ever seen us, how do they know whether they want to dance with us or not?"

Ernest laughed. "They don't—they are taking you on faith because we ask them to, and they know we'll do the same for their sisters and friends some day. You'll have to dance your best and be extra charming, though we warned them you were just kids." He did not say this last to tease. He repeated it as a mere matter of fact which no one would think of denying.

Chicken Little and Mary both resolved instantly to be as grown-up and fascinating as possible.

"We can watch the other girls and copy them—I bet I can act the same way," said Chicken Little indignantly. "And I'm every bit as tall as most of Anne's friends."

"If Mother will only let us put our hair up to-night," said Mary anxiously. "You help me tease—maybe she will for you. She likes you—she says you must have an awfully nice mother."

The pink mull had seemed the height of elegance

to Chicken Little with its dainty frills of lace. It had elbow sleeves and was a little low in the neck. But she looked at herself critically as Mrs. Rand fastened the sash firmly in place. She supposed she did look awfully little-girlish, though Mrs. Rand, after a moment's hesitation, had consented to let them do their hair in coiled braids low on their necks.

"You look just what you are anyway, sweet and eagerly young—anybody could tell this was your first dance by the expression of your faces."

Mrs. Rand noticed Jane's doubtful look as she turned from the glass. She turned and opened a box on the table. Jane caught a whiff of something fragrant. Mrs. Rand lifted out a half-dozen pink roses and some sprays of heliotrope.

"You just need these, dear, to be quite right." She pinned them loosely so the topmost bud seemed peeping over Chicken Little's shoulder. For Mary she had white lilies of the valley.

"Now run down and see if the carriage is here. I am proud of you both. Be yourselves and don't try to put on any airs, and you'll both have a beautiful time I feel sure."

It was all very well to say "be yourself," but when Chicken Little followed Mrs. Rand from the dressing rooms into the great hall, she did not feel in the least like herself. The myriads of sparkling electric

lights, the flags draped everywhere, the shining floor, the hundreds of beautiful dresses and the blue and gold of the uniforms were bewildering to see. There seemed thousands of midshipmen, big, little and medium-sized—and a short distance away they all looked astonishingly alike. She could not pick out either Ernest or Carol till they came to meet them. For one awful moment Chicken Little wished she might run straight home. Everybody seemed to be staring so—it was worse than the day of the parade. What if she should slip on the waxed floor, or do something dreadful to mortify Ernest?

She looked around at Mary. Mary did not seem so much disturbed. She was gazing about her, apparently unconscious that anyone might be looking at her in return. But Chicken Little felt as if all those eyes were boring holes right through her. Her knees fairly wobbled as she took her first steps toward the receiving line.

"Don't look so scared, Sis," Ernest smiled down at her, "nobody's going to eat you."

"Oh, Ernest, do you suppose I'll do anything dreadful?"

"Of course not, silly, but you will be stiff as a board if you don't stop thinking what you're going to do. Don't bother so much—just have a good time."

Jane never knew how she acknowledged her intro-

ductions to the august officers and their no less stately wives. She mumbled something and was immensely relieved to find that was all that seemed to be expected. She heaved such a sigh of relief when the painful ceremony was over, that Carol heard her and began to tease.

"You don't seem to enjoy hops, Chicken Little."

"Will we have to go and say good-by to them, too?"

Jane was borrowing trouble.

Her woe-begone expression was too much for Carol. He threw back his head and roared. "Of all the funny kids! You didn't suppose it would be like a Centerville candy-pull, did you?"

"I didn't—expect to be so scared," confessed Chicken Little. "My mouth feels so sort of dry and funny, and I don't seem to have—any joints."

Carol laughed again. "You'll be all right in a few minutes. Remember ours is the second."

Jane danced the first dance with Ernest. He did not find her an easy partner.

"What's the matter, Jane, you didn't use to dance so badly?" Ernest's ears were getting red. He had narrowly missed running into the commandant in his efforts to steer a sister who seemed to have a ramrod run up her back and to be incapable of easy motion.

Jane was ready to cry, but she winked back the tears and did her best to dance naturally. But the

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waltz could not be considered a success. She would cheerfully have run to the dressing-room and hid for the remainder of the evening. But Carol was at her elbow. His easy swagger was someway reassuring.

"Still scared, Jane?"

Jane did not need to reply. When she started off carefully out of step, Carol knew she was.

"Here, buck up, Jane, you're a dandy little dancer and you look good enough to eat in that pink frilly stuff—just let yourself go and I'll whirl you all right."

Carol's flattery was balm—maybe she needn't disappoint Ernest after all.

She smiled up into Carol's face with grateful eyes and fell into step unconsciously.

Carol was big and strong and an easy dancer. Chicken Little felt herself floating about the room without conscious effort. She did not mind his teasing—she was too grateful. Ernest passed them when they were halfway round the hall.

"That's more like it, Sis," he whispered as they came abreast.

Now that she was succeeding in forgetting herself, Jane became interested in the young people about her. She noticed a great many girlish eyes glancing at Carol. The big blonde lad was handsome enough to attract attention. Privately she

deemed Ernest finer-looking than Carol, if he was not so striking in appearance. Chicken Little had a sudden thought.

"Do you know, Carol, pretty nearly every boy I know is tall—you and Ernest and Pat, and Sherm is medium. But there are lots of little fellows here. That boy over there with the girl in yellow isn't as tall as I—I believe."

"Western chaps usually are bigger on the average than the eastern men. Have more room to grow, I suppose. By the way, that little one is your next partner. Ernest told me to introduce you. His name's Ames, and he is from 'Bostin.' You will wonder if he is talking United States at first, he has such a cultuhed accent. He isn't such an awful dude as he looks. Talk up to him, Jane, don't you let him put anything over on the west. He thought Kansas was largely populated with Indians till he met Ernest. He was quite keen to know Ernest's sister. I think he suspects Ernest of having been civilized since he came east. He probably thinks you are young enough to be the real thing." Carol laughed at certain recollections.

Jane was thinking too hard to notice the laugh. "Dear me, do you think I can talk to him, Carol, do you?"

"Of course, tell him about Calico and the ranch—he'll love it—sounds like the Arabian Nights to him

—at least, you can make it sound that way—don't spare expense, Chicken Little." Carol grinned wickedly.

Jane had the thought. She grinned back. "Shall I, Carol? Wouldn't it be rude?"

"Rude? Nothing! Why it's your Christian duty to entertain your partner. Think up something really worth while, Jane."

Mr. Ames had delightful manners. That was Jane's first discovery after Carol placed her in his keeping. She didn't feel in the least embarrassed with him. Possibly Carol had given her an antidote for shyness, when he gave her something else to think about. But this new lad was delightfully boyish.

"Brown says you will tell me all about the West," he observed with a smile as they moved off.

"I didn't think the West would be interesting to anyone from Boston," retorted Jane.

"I see Brown has given me a black eye already. You probably think every person in Boston goes about with a dictionary under his arm."

"Well, doesn't he?" Jane's brown eyes assumed a slightly puzzled, wholly innocent expression.

Mr. Ames stared at her in bewilderment. "Oh, come now, you don't really think that?"

"Why, of course, I've never been in Boston, but I have read a good deal and——"

"And is that the sort of stuff they tell about us out there? Why, I have always heard they were forever rapping Boston—the Hub business and all that—but I didn't suppose it was as bad as this." Mr. Ames looked disgusted.

"Why," said Chicken Little innocently, "I don't think it is half so bad to be carrying dictionaries around, as six-shooters the way we do at home."

Mr. Ames scrutinized his partner more closely. Jane's eyes were limpidly wondering. The casual observer would have sworn there was no guile in her.

"Six-shooters? Why, I thought Ernest said that sort of thing was just newspaper lies except in the mining camps. You haven't any mining in your part of Kansas, have you?"

Chicken Little gulped. "Why, yes, coal—and lead—and—lime—and——" She was watching Mr. Ames to see how far she dared go.

"Oh, yes, coal—but I had never heard of the lead, but you don't have any gold or silver?"

"Not yet," replied Jane, "but there's no telling—we found some shiny particles in the sand by the creek one day, and there's quartz."

"You don't say. That's interesting about the lime. I don't ever remember hearing of a lime mine before."

This came near being too much for Jane's gravity.

"Oh, there's lots of limestone rock in our country. It's soft when it is first taken out, so you can whittle it into any shape you want to."

Mr. Ames smiled incredulously. "I am afraid you are, what do you westerners call it, stuffing me?"

Jane changed the subject quickly lest she should giggle. "I think the funniest thing we do is planting things by the moon."

"The moon, are you as superstitious as that?" Mr. Ames forgot himself for one instant.

"Why, yes, things always grow better in the light of the moon—that is everything but pumpkins."

"Why not pumpkins?" Mr. Ames was curious to hear more of this peculiar belief.

"Oh, they grow too fast," said Jane airily. "You see when the vines grow so awfully fast it wears out the pumpkins dragging them over the ground."

There was a profound silence. Chicken Little did not dare to look at the midshipman from Boston for a moment. She hadn't meant to go quite so fast, but her tongue ran away with her. She had heard Frank and Jim Bart reel off such yarns so often. It was one of the rivalries of Big John to see who could spin the biggest one.

She glanced up as the silence became oppressive, to find Mr. Ames regarding her, half amused, half resentful. He laughed when he met her eyes.

"I was dead easy—wasn't I? But you are so

sweet and innocent looking—I never should have thought it of you, Miss Jane.”

Jane was instantly contrite. “Please forgive me—I shouldn’t have—but everybody thinks we’re such heathen out in Kansas—and it is fun to measure wits. And some of the things I told you were true—honest.”

“But it would take a mind-reader to know when you were telling the truth. Tell me, are most western girls like you?”

“Not quite all,” said Jane demurely, “some of them tell the truth.”

“I think,” said Mr. Ames, “that I shall punish you by making you give me another dance.”

“But the program’s full already,” said Jane rather bluntly.

“Never mind—I can make room.” He took her program and carefully erasing Carol’s name, wrote his own in its place. “We will just even up with Brown,” he said with a laugh.

At first Jane started to protest. Then she remembered certain ancient grudges she had against Carol—it would be fun—she let the name stand.

Carol’s second dance was next to the last. She had scarcely had a glimpse of him since her first with him. Carol had found a new girl—a real young lady in a Paris gown—and he was worshipping at her shrine regardless of other engagements. He

didn't come near for that second dance, and but for Mr. Ames, Chicken Little would have been a wall-flower in a strange garden.

Ernest had looked out for her carefully all during the evening, and when one or two of the lads had failed to show up, had found her another partner. He evidently supposed he could depend on Carol, but he was nowhere to be seen. Chicken Little wondered if Mr. Ames thought it queer that Carol never came near. She felt quite at home with the little Bostonian by this time.

The worst about Carol's desertion was, that he did not so much as mention his rudeness; not even when he and Ernest escorted them to the edge of the Academy grounds.

"Had a good time, Jane?" he greeted her cheerfully.

"Of course she's had a good time," Mrs. Rand replied for her. "Look at her cheeks."

"I'll never forget tonight as long as I live," Chicken Little declared. "Oh, I'm so glad I could come—only——" Chicken Little hesitated. "It wasn't a bit the way I thought it would be."

She confided one thing more about the ball to Mary before they crept into bed.

"When I am eighteen, I am coming back here to a hop and show them!"



CHAPTER · XVI BROTHER AND · SISTER

"JUST wait till I am a First Classman, then you shall have a June Day to remember—flowers and wonderful favors and all that sort of thing. The girls in this part of the country are daffy about it. Some of them pretty nearly ask for invitations from the First Year men, I've heard." Ernest skipped a pebble along the waters of the Severn and watched for the third splash that should attest his skill.

He had been permitted only one brief hour for his sister on her last morning. His class were getting ready for their summer cruise, and were up to the ears in packing and settling their small affairs. He was spending this precious hour with Jane down by the river. They were seated cozily in an old boat drawn up on the beach.

"Why, this one was lovely, Ernest, only——"

"Yes?"

"Well, you know I've never been to anything but country parties and little doings in the High School at Centerville and this was so grand—and formal—I didn't feel at home. I guess Marian was right—I am too young. I do wish grown people weren't so ever and everlastingly right! They keep tellin' you things and you don't believe them—only 'most always you have to believe them after a while, anyhow. If they just wouldn't tell you, and you found it out for yourself, you wouldn't mind so much. It's having them say 'I told you so' that makes you mad. Ernest Morton, don't you dare whisper to Marian that I didn't have a wonderful time at the hop—because I did—truly I did. But, of course, I should have enjoyed it better if I hadn't felt so green and gawky."

"You weren't gawky, Sis. You were a little stiff at first because you were so scared. But everybody knew you were just a kid. Stop your worrving!"

"But I didn't want to be just a kid—and I wanted you to be proud of me—and Carol—he wouldn't have treated anybody else that way." Jane was winking hard. The evening before had left a tang of humiliation along with the memory of its pleasures.

Ernest was watching a sail-boat skim along the rippling blue water before them.

"Say, that chap understands his business all right and this is a honey of a day for a sail—wish I could have taken you out!"

Chicken Little regarded the graceful boat with its white wings indifferently. She had to make peace with herself about last night before she could be comfortable. The sunshine had motes in it. And the soft June breeze and the scent of roses were as dust and ashes, because she could not enjoy them in her present frame of mind.

Ernest did not understand this. He was basking in the sunshine like a cat. It seemed mighty cozy and home-like to have Jane sitting close beside him. There were a lot of things he wanted to talk over with her. He was thinking over some of these while he idly watched the sail-boat.

"Don't you think it was hateful of Carol?"

"Hateful?—Carol? Oh, about cutting that dance? Well, you danced it with Ames—I don't see what you have to kick about. Perhaps Carol was hunting you, and saw you sailing off."

"Do you suppose he did?" Jane brightened.

"I don't suppose anything about it—what do you care what Carol did? Carol's the kind to trot around after new girls. And I don't care for the kind he picks. Do you know, Sis, I have learned a lot of things this last year?"

He turned toward his sister. Jane looked up at him inquiringly.

“About people—and what really counts. Take Mother for instance. You know we used to think that Mother was awful strict and kind of old-fogey in some of her notions. Well, she is, but I tell you she’s what a lot of the new-fangled, stylish mothers that come here are not, she’s a lady! I wish Mother didn’t have to work so hard. I don’t mean she shall when I begin to get a salary. You know before Mother came I worried because—oh, I was afraid she wouldn’t have any new clothes and she’d be dowdy and—you see the fellows kind of size you up by what your folks look like when they visit you. Honest, Sis, I didn’t know whether I was glad she was coming or not for awhile. When I was waiting at the station for the train to pull in, I kept wondering what she would look like, though I was dead ashamed of myself for feeling that way. When she came and choked up and hugged me and cried—you know how she does—I felt like a yellow cur. And I needn’t have worried about her looks. Anybody could see her clothes were made in the country. But they were nice and her white hair and that little air she has—I didn’t remember Mother had that manner. Why, the first thing I knew, the Commandant was showing her around and looking after her as if she had been the president’s wife. Cricky, I was

proud of her! Carol noticed it, too, and the fellows were all mighty respectful." Ernest paused to skip another stone.

"The chaps come here from all sorts of homes. Lots of them have more money than we have, but I tell you, Sis, the more I see of other people's folks the more I like my own. We don't have a lot of servants and wine on the table and that sort of dog. But there's something fine and dignified about Father and Mother—people are going to respect them any place you put them! And that's what counts to my notion."

Jane was watching a tiny rowboat rocking in the wash behind a steam tug. There were two boys and a man in it. The broad Severn was brightly blue and the sunshine broke on the dancing waves into a myriad sparkles. She was listening to what Ernest said but something was singing in the back of her head. Only part of it put itself into words. "Calm Capri waits and opens wide—her azure gates." This blue river was part of the big blue sea over by Italy. And Ernest would be sailing to see it, perhaps, next year. Some way her world seemed to be growing so much bigger. Her discontent with herself was seeping away. What one young girl did, wasn't of much importance after all in such a big world. She came back with a little start to what Ernest was saying.

He had not waited for her to reply. He had been positively hungry for this talk. To have Chicken Little close enough so he could pick at her ribbons and tell her all the things he had been mulling over, was wondrous pleasant. The boy had been more homesick than he knew for home faces, and the precious home privilege of saying what he thought, regardless.

"Another thing, Jane, you remember the talk we had that Sunday—herding? Well, I've kept my promise." Ernest's ears grew pink as they usually did when he was embarrassed. "But I had a pretty close call once or twice. It wasn't so blamed easy as you might think! But it makes an awful lot of difference to me what *you* do—so I stuck it out. I wouldn't have you one of the cheap kind for a farm, Sis, though you couldn't be—not with Mother and Marian in the family. But it's more than not letting the fellows play softy—you don't want to let them think you're thinking about them too much, the way some of the girls round here do. It is enough to make you sick, though of course you're flattered at first. Some of that sort have a string of the younger boys or the smart alecks hanging round them. But the boys outgrow them pretty soon and despise them—I wish girls could hear a crowd of boys talk once. There's a heap of things they'd stop doing, if they could."

Chicken Little was listening intently and she was bristling.

"Maybe it wouldn't hurt the boys to hear the girls talk, too," she interrupted pertly.

Ernest did not seem interested in this phase of the question.

"I'm not trying to lecture you, Jane; what are you so touchy about? You don't need to listen if you don't want to, but I was trying to tell you that I'd decided to cut out girls till I am old enough to have some sense. I notice the chaps that are always spooning get in with the wrong kind—they don't do good work—and people make fun of them. Now, I don't mean to preach, but you seem in such an awful rush to go to parties and be grown up—and—seriously, Chicken Little, I wish you wouldn't. You'll be a lot more attractive when you are a little older, if you don't fuss so much about such things now."

Ernest slipped his arm around Jane's shoulders and gave her a brotherly squeeze.

"I think a lot of you, Sis, and, I don't want to make you cocky, but you're getting mighty good looking."

"Do you really think so, Ernest? I want to be—awfully." Jane nestled closer. "And I'm going to be a walking angel this summer. You needn't worry about my going to parties, I have to put in my time

making butter. But I have had this wonderful trip—and I promise you, Ernest, I'll knuckle down to my studies and quit being so silly. I guess it does take more than putting your hair up to be a young lady—like Anne Rand. I suppose I couldn't expect to be easy and graceful last night—you have to grow into—that. You just watch me grow, Ernest Morton!"

The little rowboat had drawn in to the shore. The boys clambering out seemed to remind Ernest that time was running. He pulled out his watch with guilty haste.

"Gee whillikens—I've got to run for it! Good-by, little sis,—oh, here I almost forgot—take this to Mother—it's for the dining-room paper—I saved it out of the spending money Father sends me. I don't like Mother's going without things for the rest of us."

Ernest thrust fifteen dollars in bills in Chicken Little's hands, and after a hasty hug and kiss, set off on the run for the parade ground.

Chicken Little watched him till he turned and waved to her, then she walked slowly off, the money tightly clutched in her hand.

The little roll held her thoughts, and led them over a thousand miles away to the ranch. Her mind echoed Ernest's words. Yes, maybe Mother was strict and old fogey—but she was going without

things for her Chicken Little's pleasure. And she? She had been taking it quite as a matter of course.

Chicken Little registered a vow. She would make the very best butter she could that summer—and she would help her mother every single day. The sunshine poured down upon her uncovered head in a warm benediction. And the little waves out on the river danced and sparkled. And far away in Kansas where the prairies were a riot of early summer bloom, Mrs. Morton was wondering what Chicken Little was doing at that moment.

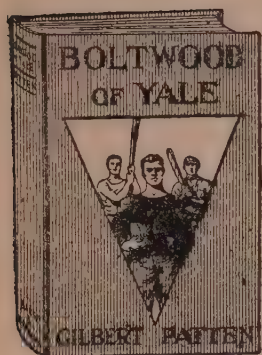
Chicken Little herself didn't know precisely what she was doing. But the fairies could have told her, what Sherm had already told her under the apple trees the year before, that she was growing up. And the process was taking time, and sunshine, and new ideas, and much thinking. And the best of it all was that her world was growing, too—bigger—and more beautiful and more demanding. She had to grow herself to keep up with it.

THE END.

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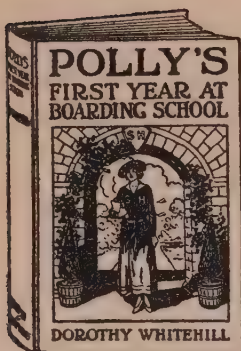
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